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Discovering England: G. K. Chesterton
and English national identity, 1900-1936

by

Susan E. Hanssen

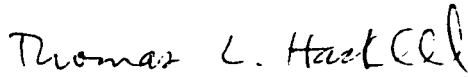
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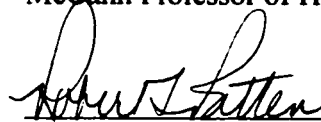
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ABSTRACT

Discovering England: G. K. Chesterton and English national identity, 1900-1936

by

Susan E. Hanssen

G. K. Chesterton (1874-1936), an English journalist and man-of-letters, gained an broad audience for his cultural criticism in the first decades of the twentieth century. This dissertation presents an explanation for Chesterton's widespread popularity based on a reading of contemporary reviews of Chesterton's work. It argues that one of the chief reasons for Chesterton's popularity was that he provided an understanding of English national identity at a time when this was problematic for the British public. His early literary criticism on Charles Dickens and Robert Browning, written in the context of the Anglo-Boer War and widespread anti-war agitation, questioned the Kiplingesque glorification of the British Empire and the racial identifications of Englishness. In attempting to create a spiritual or cultural rather than racial genealogy for Englishness, Chesterton got involved in debates over England's religious heritage, the Church of England's establishment, and the role of religion in state education, the nature of English liberalism, and the possibilities for a native English brand of socialism. These debates led him eventually to reformulate the Whig history of England—particularly in his epic poem of King Alfred, *The Ballad of the White Horse* (1911), his propaganda during World War I, and his *Short History of England* (1918)—to tell a tale in which the persistence of Christian orthodoxy was the key to England's peculiar liberal cultural inheritance. After his death in 1936, Chesterton's conception of England as a nation with a past rooted in European Christendom contributed to rhetorical understandings of England's identity and role during World War II.

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Introduction

National identity is an issue very much alive in England at present, for both politicians and historians. It might even be said that Great Britain is going through an identity crisis of potentially historic proportions. For the past three hundred years Englishness has been roughly synonymous with Britishness because of England's dominant position in the multinational state that encompasses Scotland and Wales. To be Scottish or Welsh was to have a special ethnic heritage within the national culture, but few gave much consideration to what exactly it meant to be English. But recent political changes are forcing England to consider her identity seriously as a distinct nation within the British state. Scotland now has an independent parliament, reversing the unification of the English and Scottish parliaments in 1707. Since the eighteenth century the Union Jack, a combination of the flags of England, Scotland and Ireland, has symbolized the political unity of the British Isles. Now, with the possibility of regional representation and regional grants from the European Union, the British are finding it more and more tempting to think of themselves as independent units. Below the surface of these political rearrangements the public has begun to grapple with the question of English national identity.¹

¹ For a spectrum of reactions to these developments see Brian Doyle, *English and Englishness* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989); Samuel, Raphael (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989); Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (eds.), *The Myths We Live By* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). Kenneth Lunn, 'Reconsidering "Britishness": The Construction and Significance of National Identity in Twentieth Century Britain', in Brian Jenkins and Spyros A. Sofos (eds.), *Nation and Identity in Contemporary Europe* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Darcus Howe, "The

The last time the issue of English national identity was “on the table” in this way was a century ago, at the turn of the twentieth century. During the late Victorian and Edwardian periods Ireland’s agitation for Home Rule challenged the idea of Great Britain, and the extension of the British Empire raised concerns about corruption and decadence at the heart of the Empire, England. From the end of the Victorian period through the inter-war years, the nation renegotiated its sense of identity in response to these and other factors.²

Historians have recognized religion as an important factor in the development of English identity from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, but have given it less importance in this development since the Napoleonic period. Historian Linda Colley brought the role of religion to the forefront of discussions of the political and cultural consolidation of Britain, but the way she formulated the role of religion in English identity formation implied that it would no longer be significant by the turn of the twentieth century. Colley argued that an aggressive Protestantism served to unite the English and Scottish against the threat of French invasion and that France was therefore portrayed as the political embodiment of the Catholic “other.”³ Following the logic of this model, historians have assumed that the overarching importance of religious identity would play a less vital role in the national self-image once the French threat diminished

young don’t want an English national identity,” *New Statesman* 13 (676):22, October 23, 2000; and Roger Scruton, *England: an elegy* (London, Chatto and Windus, 2000).

² Robert Colls and Phillip Dodd, eds., *Englishness: Politics and Culture 1880-1920* (London, Croom Helm, 1986).

³ Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging a Nation, 1707-1837* (New Haven and London, Yale University Press: 1992). See also Gerald Newman, *The Rise of English Nationalism: A Cultural History 1740-1830* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1987).

after 1815. This conclusion seemed to be confirmed by the fact that the established Anglican and Presbyterian churches lost their political monopoly by the mid-1800s.⁴

Historians have thus failed to fully appreciate the extent to which religion, though less particularly and stridently “Protestant” religion, remained a significant factor in nineteenth-century identifications of Englishness. This is part of a more general lack of appreciation for the role of religion at all levels of English society in the Victorian period, based on assumptions about the rapid progress of secularization and the dominance of secularism by the opening of the twentieth century. Recently, however, historians have challenged the narrative of nineteenth-century secularization in Britain, arguing for religion’s continuing importance into at least the first half of the twentieth century. A group of revisionists, Jeffrey Cox, Hugh McCleod and Callum Brown particularly, argue that the turn of the twentieth century in Britain was characterized by an increase and popularization of religious discourse, as rival Christian denominations competed in an open market of beliefs. England’s religious character splintered and intensified at the same time, becoming a more complex and controversial element in definitions of national identity.⁵

When the opening years of the twentieth century are taken to form an important but neglected moment in the development of England’s national and religious identity,

⁴ Keith Robbins, *Great Britain. Identities, Institutions, and the Idea of Britishness* (London: Longmans, 1998); A. D. Gilbert, *Religion and Society in Industrial England: Church, Chapel and Social Change 1740-1914* (London: Longmans, 1978).

⁵ Hugh McCleod, “Protestantism and British National Identity, 1815-1945,” *Nation and Religion: Perspectives on Europe and Asia* (Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press: 1999), 44-70; Jeffrey Cox and Sheldon Stromquist, Introduction, *Contesting the Master Narrative* (Iowa City, University of Iowa Press, 1998); Callum Brown, *The Death of Christian Britain* (Routledge, 2000).

the figure of G. K. Chesterton strides into view as an important but neglected protagonist of the period.⁶ Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) was a London-born and public-school educated literary critic and journalist. He began his career during the controversies over imperialism during the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902). Rudyard Kipling and G. K. Chesterton provided very different poetic expressions of what it meant to be English during the war.⁷ Kipling has received due attention as the voice of boisterous imperialism in Britain who popularized the language of race in his definitions of British identity and expressed frustration with whiggish cultural definitions of Englishness that impeded her

⁶ The standard biography is Maisie Ward's two volume *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1943) and *Return to Chesterton* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1952). Also Dudley Barker, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (London: Constable, 1973), Alzina Stone Dale, *The Outline of Sanity: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1982), Michael Finch, *G. K. Chesterton: A Biography* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), Michael Coren, *Gilbert: The Man Who Was G. K. Chesterton* (New York: Paragon House, 1990), and Joseph Pierce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1996). For bibliographies of Chesterton's work see John Sullivan, *G. K. Chesterton: A Bibliography* (London: University of London Press, 1958) and *Chesterton Continued: A Bibliographical Supplement* (London: London University Press, 1968).

⁷ M. van Wyck Smith, *Drummer Hodge. The Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War 1899-1902* (Oxford, 1978), chapter 4. Wyck Smith uses Kipling and Thomas Hardy as the two most significant poets and deals with Chesterton among a number lesser poets of the war. He does not mention Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse*, which, although only published in full some years after the war, gives Chesterton a claim to a greater place in his account. Nevertheless it is more for his journalism than his poetry that Chesterton deserves to be considered a counterpart to Kipling. See John Coates, *Chesterton and the Edwardian Cultural Crises* (Hull: Hull University Press, 1974) and Ian Boyd, *The Novels of G. K. Chesterton: A Study in Art and Propaganda* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975).

J. H. Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain 1900-1939* (London: Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1986), "Public Poets," 65-86, "Illuminations of Empire," 124-140 and "Rash Political Indignation," 104-124.

imperial progress.⁸ Imperialism for Kipling was a matter of spreading enlightened civilization through the dominion of the Anglo-Saxon race. His was a secular vision of the nation's character although the Victorian evangelical sense of destiny and mission still influenced his rhetoric. Chesterton was in a sense Kipling's alter-ego, a 'Little Englander,' an opponent of Britain's imperial expansion during the Boer War and proponent of Irish Home Rule. He resisted racial definitions of what it meant to be English and sought instead to adapt the traditional religious definition of Englishness to suit the changing character of the nation at the end of the nineteenth century.

Chesterton was baptized into the Church of England and raised vaguely Unitarian, but became increasingly interested in "orthodox" Christianity through his wife Frances's devout Anglo-Catholicism and his only brother Cecil's conversion to Roman Catholicism. He converted to Roman Catholicism himself in 1922 and on his death in 1936 Pope Leo XIV declared him *Defensor Fidei*, a title no Englishman had received since Henry VIII received it for his defense of Catholic theology against Lutheranism.⁹ Chesterton's prolific lifelong career in journalism made his personal spiritual journey a public event. It inspired outpourings of commentary on the role of religion in English public life and in the private lives of English men and women.

Even historians whose narratives of British history assume that secularization was an accomplished fact by the end of the Victorian period bow in Chesterton's direction

⁸ Denis Judd, "Diamonds are forever? Kipling's Imperialism," in Gordon Marsden ed. *Victorian Values: Personalities and Perspectives in Nineteenth-Century Society*. London: Longman, 1998) Preben Kaarsholm, "Kipling and masculinity," in Raphael Samuel (ed.), *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (New York and London: Routledge, 1989), 215-226.

⁹ Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, 553.

because of his sheer ubiquity as a religious voice in the public arena in the twentieth century.¹⁰ But what amount to asides on the topic of religion hardly do justice to Chesterton's role in the negotiation of English cultural identity at the turn of the century. His work reached a large audience, although it was of a largely ephemeral nature—newspaper columns, journal articles, serialized fiction, political cartoons, drinking songs, pamphlets, public lectures and debates—and his public considered him not an anachronism but “the man of the hour.” He was never university educated and lacked any appearance of being a throw-back to the Victorian cleric, don, or man-of-letters. He was, to his readers, that thoroughly modern figure, a journalist, or even a kind of self-advertising popular personality. Chesterton successfully cultivated a reputation that combined Christian orthodoxy and Englishness, and his initials, “GKC,” became the most popularly recognized label for amusing commentary on English life and politics in the Edwardian period. How he defined Englishness and Christianity and their relationship to each other can only be explained in the context of the story of GKC's active life of public controversy.

Chesterton gained a reputation for a paradoxical style of writing, but perhaps the central paradox in his thought and work was his definition of Englishness. He argued that liberalism and democratic radicalism were properly outgrowths of Catholic orthodoxy. But in the Whig narrative of English history, liberalism and Catholicism had been considered intellectually and historically opposed. Democracy, nineteenth-century liberals argued, did not first arise in Catholic Christian countries, but in countries where

¹⁰ See for example, Peter Clarke, *Hope and Glory: Britain 1900-1990* (London, 1996), 162 in the section on “Church and State,” 159-166.

Protestant and evangelical dissent, or philosophic doubt, were advanced. Or conversely, when liberalism did arise in predominantly Catholic countries, it was in opposition to the ecclesiastical establishment. Chesterton tried to revise this theory in order to dispel the idea of a necessary conflict between Catholic orthodoxy and a liberal democratic view of society and the state. British Whig historians had used this theory to explain the dichotomy between the paths taken by Britain and France in developing a modern liberal state: Britain, a predominantly Protestant nation, taking a relatively bloodless evolutionary and reforming path to liberalism, and France, a Catholic nation, achieving a liberal state only by a series of violent revolutions. Chesterton's idea of the English nation as fundamentally liberal and fundamentally orthodox in its Christianity was an ambitious and striking attempt to overturn a settled explanation of British and European history and identity. Chesterton was writing for his own generation, trying to reveal that the perceived crises of liberalism and of traditional religious affiliation in the Edwardian England were inter-related crises. He argued that the continued viability of Englishness, liberalism, and Christian orthodoxy depended on public recognition of the inter-relation between the three. Chesterton's public did in fact recognize his attempt to revivify "orthodoxy" as a unique and important contribution to the on-going construction of national identity, but historians have lost a grasp of his intervention in this project.

My dissertation examines the reasons for Chesterton's rise to immense popularity at the turn of the century. I argue that one of the chief reasons why Chesterton attracted attention because he was offering a new vision of English national identity at a time when it was needed in Britain.

The dissertation begins with Chesterton's involvement in controversy over the Anglo-Boer War in 1899 and closes around 1922, the date of Chesterton's conversion to Roman Catholicism, but it is also a convenient date for pointing towards a definite change, if not decline, in Chesterton's reputation. I attribute this change to a confluence of causes. After his brother Cecil's death in World War I, Chesterton took on editing his brother's magazine, the *New Witness*, which later became *GK's Weekly*. Instead of addressing a diverse readership through a variety of newspapers and journals, he targeted a single audience with his own paper and expended much of his energy in keeping it alive as a testimony to his brother's ideal of liberal political journalism. His leading role in the Distributist Society also perhaps represented a fragmentation of his message into separate religious and economic pieces directed at different audiences. Also, after his conversion but more so after his death, Chesterton was absorbed into a very large, international Catholic ghetto. His audience continued to grow by leaps and bounds but was more sectarian, and his reputation with other segments of the reading public was constricted as he became identified as a Roman Catholic apologist in the midst of the "Catholic revival" of the 1930s-1950s. The cultural milieu changed after the First World War so that a new generation of writers saw Chesterton as Victorian and conservative, associating him with anti-modernists and their neo-medievalism, whereas the pre-war public had viewed him figure of a modern consensus.¹¹ Despite the splintering of Chesterton's audience and his

¹¹ In cultural histories of England it has been assumed that Chesterton's "cultural moment" surfaced only very briefly. He is mentioned in the first volume, dedicated to the years 1900-1918, but does not reappear in later volumes of *The Twentieth Century Mind: History, Ideas, and Literature in Britain*, ed. C. B. Cox and A. E. Dyson (Oxford, 1972) (though this series was published before the revival of interest in Chesterton which began around 1974 and was marked by the founding of the *Chesterton Review*). Graham Hough, writing on "English Criticism" for the 1900-1918 volume, notes that Chesterton was part

loss of hold over the English public, his attempt to rediscover a European, Christian, Liberal, Little England did help to shape the cultural self-recognition the English public in the beginning decades of the twentieth century.

The chapters of the dissertation will trace the stages of Chesterton's construction of English national identity and the public's response between 1900 and 1922.

Part I contends that Chesterton's earliest strategy of redefining Englishness was part of an on-going Edwardian project of rewriting English literary history, creating a canon of English classics, and incorporating the Victorians into the canon. This project went on alongside similar projects by the Celts, Welsh, and Americans to define their national identity through literature. His main interventions in this cultural rethinking were his efforts to rescue and rewrite two Victorian greats, Robert Browning and Charles Dickens, as particularly English, Liberal and religious. He argued at the same time that their achievement rested on their connection with a European literary tradition.

of a conscious reaction against the fin-de-siecle aestheticism, "not a panic-stricken reflex but a deliberate choice." His turn towards Catholicism was one of a number of "purposeful, polemical returns to traditional moral and social standards" and was thus very different from "the aesthetic Catholicism of the nineties." Whereas Wilde and the decadents dabbled in Catholicism as a form of counter-cultural protest, Chesterton's Catholicism was "earthy, populist . . . eager above all to show its community with the native temper of England, old England, that dreamland old England that haunted the imagination of Dickens and Cobbett, and was still, under the name of the organic society, to cast a dying glow on the pages of *Scrutiny*" (475-476).

On the other end of my chronological spectrum, Peter Clarke notes the fact that the writers of the inter-war "Catholic revival," such as Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, and T. S. Eliot, wrote "in a wholly different idiom" from Chesterton. These writers, Clarke says, "deliberately distanced Catholicism from the real social roots of its revival in Britain," i.e. working class Irish immigration and the revival of Catholic theology and ritualism in middle class Anglicanism. *Hope and Glory* (1996), 162-4..

Part II explores a controversy that arose between Chesterton and the editor of the foremost socialist journal in Britain, Robert Blatchford of the *Clarion*, for its significance for his definition of Englishness. Through their debate over the viability of England's peculiar social and religious culture—the heritage of Victorian Liberal Nonconformity and Christian Socialism—Chesterton refined his notion of England's religious and political identity. As the controversy expanded to include debates with H. G. Wells and G. B. Shaw, Chesterton argued that the true English radical was not the social scientist idealized by the Fabians but rather the Christian, liberal amateur and humorist. Through his defense of the spiritual element in English liberal radicalism, Chesterton came increasingly to identify the English religious tradition, not with broad church humanism, but with a historic tradition of European Christianity.

Part III looks at Chesterton's rewriting of the traditional points of reference in English national history. In a variety of works, such as his epic poem of Alfred the Great, his wartime writings, and his *Short History of England* (1917), Chesterton projected his version of English literary and religious history onto a larger history using the kings and battles as metaphors for the spiritual development of England. He emphasized England's ties to a European past, and the persistence of a Catholic, liberal, Little England within the traditional Whig narrative of British history. Chesterton took this vision of English history and identity abroad in his lecture tour in the United States in 1921. There Chesterton reiterated to large crowds in city after city that Englishness could not be reduced to a monolithic racial identity, as in theories of Anglo-Saxon or Teutonic inheritance. He wanted to dispel the notion of an Anglo-American alliance based on race, especially if that racial identity also linked the two nations to Germany, to socialism, and

to a eugenic mentality. Englishness, he argued, was rather one branch of a larger, European, multicultural spiritual family. To the extent that America shared with England a heritage of a liberal and Christian “orthodoxy,” it was tied to Europe by spiritual bonds of brotherhood. Chesterton thus became a part of the effort to reconfigure English and American national identity in preparation for their alliance with France against Germany in World War II.

The dissertation aims to understand Chesterton’s work as an intervention in the on-going construction of English (and by implication, European) identity. It would be interesting to explore how much of Chesterton’s vision of Englishness survived in the outburst of national self-definition brought on by Britain’s special position in World War II, or what of Chesterton’s Englishness survives in the discussions of English cultural identity and relationship to Europe today. But that is another project, which can only come after we have captured Chesterton’s literary, historical, and cultural conception of Little England as he presented it to the public at the very beginning of the twentieth century.

Part I. Introduction: G. K. Chesterton's early literary criticism

G. K. Chesterton gained a reputation as an interpreter of English national identity at a turning point in the development of English nationalism. As he recalled in 1936,

The two great movements of my youth and early manhood were Imperialism and Socialism. They were supposed to be fighting each other; and so doubtless they did, in the sense of waving Red Flags against Union Jacks. But as compared with those dim gropings in my own imagination, the two things were in union . . . Both believed in unification and centralization on a large scale. Neither could have seen any meaning in my own fancy for having things on a smaller and smaller scale.¹

In terms of the noisy foreground of politics, Chesterton attracted the public's attention in the context of the peace movement in England during the Anglo-Boer war (1899-1902), which has been compared to the peace movement in the United States during the Vietnam War in terms of the extent and duration of its domestic political impact.² But he was also quietly recruited into the on-going process of constructing a national literary history for England that could form the basis for a romantic nationalism comparable to the liberal nationalism other countries had developed in the nineteenth-century. Steadily, in the background of the apparent break-up of Victorian liberalism in the shouting matches and street fights between imperialists and socialists, the process of defining English identity in relation to language and literature continued and expanded. Chesterton forged his hybrid thought on English patriotism by straddling these two movements.

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (Kent: Fisher Press reprint, 1992, originally published, 1936), 109.

² See Stephen Koss's introduction in *The Pro-Boers: the Anatomy of an Antiwar Movement* (University of Chicago Press, 1973).

Chesterton's earliest work was as a common foot soldier in the Victorian process of creating a "Whig interpretation of English literature."³ England did not undergo the revolutionary upheaval or foreign invasion that led to the development of "self-conscious 'liberationist' nationalism and its associated imperative of political, cultural, or ethnic self-definition" on the continent in the nineteenth century. So the process of national self-identification occurred in Victorian England with less of the pressure of political or ideological division that eventually led continental nationalist movements to root their sense of identity in race. The English could afford to be more "celebratory and consensual" and literature became "the central symbolic expression of the 'imagined community' of the English people."⁴ England's national literary self-definition paralleled the development of the Whig history of England's continuous liberal political settlement, reaching its climax in the late Victorian period and breaking after the cultural shock of the Great War. Chesterton was one of the younger, post-Victorian generation of English literary nationalists, who were entrusted with the task of warding off the impending demise of the England's whiggish confidence in her liberal identity.

Chesterton attempted to bolster the Victorian Whig history of liberal England, facing challenges from the right and left, by uniting the story of English liberalism with the story of European liberalism. Whig history was a grand narrative of the continuity of parliamentary liberalism expanding downwards to include the democracy at a stately and

³ Stephan Collini, "The Whig Interpretation of English Literature, literary history and national identity," *English Past: essays in history and culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴ Stephan Collini, "The Whig Interpretation of English Literature," *English Geneologies*, 345, 347, 354.

dignified pace. Whig historians painted a strong contrast between the traditional nature of English liberalism and the revolutionary liberalism in France. Chesterton argued that liberal England was united to the European liberal revolutions in the nineteenth century in her literary history if not in her political history. He seemed to believe that if the literary “greats” of the Victorian Age like Robert Browning and Charles Dickens were incorporated into the canon of English literature, they would become the heroes of a romantic liberal English identity that would prove more flexible and more vibrant in the twentieth century than the Whig-Liberal British identity of the nineteenth century.

Chesterton began his literary career interpreting the liberal Victorians as “classics” of English literature for an expanding literate public. As Chesterton himself put it, many of the “eminent Victorians” were “being born again to the democracy in the form of cheap editions.”⁵ William Hodder recruited him as an art and literature critic for Hodder & Stoughton’s *Bookman*, a weekly journal edited by W. Robertson Nicoll, a Methodist minister who also edited the religious journal, the *British Weekly*. Each monthly issue of the *Bookman*, published in Britain and the United States, contained Chesterton’s musings on different authors and artists. Chesterton weighed the artists’ political and moral influence on the public and evaluated them as possible candidates for places in an English canon of literature and art.⁶ He did his time as one of the foot

⁵ G. K. Chesterton, “George MacDonald and his Work,” *Daily News*, June 11, 1901 (Review of George MacDonald, *The Marquis of Lossie*).

⁶ This work of building a popular canon of English literature (rather than one meant primarily for the schools) must be placed in the context of the expansion of literacy after the 1870 Education Act and in the context of the Liberal Party’s concerted effort to

soldiers of this movement with these *Bookman* articles and “Bookman Booklets,” a series of literary monographs to which he contributed essays on Carlyle, Dickens, Stevenson, Tolstoy, Tennyson, and Thackeray. Series like the “Bookman Booklets,” complete with portraits of the new Victorian additions to the national gallery of fame, were designed to make it possible for “the aspiring chimney-sweep” to “buy the nucleus of a very good paper library for a few shillings.”⁷ With the photos of the birthplaces and deathplaces of all these newly minted Victorian “greats,” series such as these worked to create a web of literary and historic association around the country that proclaimed England a liberal nation.⁸ They were heavy on illustrations and short on text, but Chesterton had a flare for epigrammatic phrases.⁹ When he was invited to write *Robert Browning* for the English

educate the public into re-electing them. Every issue of the *Bookman* proclaimed that it was “not a dry-as-dust magazine for specialists; every line and every picture it contains is of peculiar interest to the great and ever-increasing public that delights in books.” See D. J. Palmer, *The Rise of English Studies: An Account of the Study of English Language and Literature from Its Origins to the Making of the Oxford English School* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965).

⁷ G. K. Chesterton, “George MacDonald and his Work,” *Daily News*, June 11, 1901; *Twelve Masters of Prose and Verse*, selections by Wilfred Whitten (“John o’ London”), portraits by Joseph Simpson (W. Grierson, T. P.’s Weekly Office, London, 1909); Sir Harry Johnston (“author of *Pioneers of Empire*”), *A Gallery of Heroes and Heroines*, with portraits by Joseph Simpson (London, 1915); Bart Kennedy, *Soldiers of Labour*, illustrated by Joseph Simpson (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1917).

⁸ So that Chesterton could later write that “the chances are a hundred to one that every man of us is living on a historic spot. The chances are a hundred to one that every man of us has almost as much ground for interest in his own neighborhood as if he had a cottage on the plain of Waterloo.” G. K. Chesterton, *Literary London*, by Elsie Lang (London, 1906) [published in a series of travel guides, the European Cathedral Series]; Each month, the *Bookman* also included a new addition to its Gallery of Famous Modern Authors . . . “many readers have the complete series framed on their walls.”

⁹ It is amusing to note the young (and recently married) Chesterton’s earnestness and efforts to tone down his naturally exuberant style.

Men of Letters series and *Charles Dickens* for Methuen's Shilling Library, Chesterton already had a place in the enterprise of turning literary figures into symbols of national character that the Victorians had begun.¹⁰

Before he launched into book-length literary criticism, however, the public got to know him in another forum that provided a different framework for his ideas about English history and identity. His initiation into the literary world coincided with the Anglo-Boer War and he became involved in the anti-war movement and political journalism. He saw himself as an English radical, aligned with the opposition at the peak of British imperialism when empire seemed the glory of the immediate past and the wave of the future, and de-colonization seemed a figment of some reactionary utopian dream.

I saw all the public men and public bodies, the people in the street, my own middle-class and most of my family and friends, solid in favour of something that seemed inevitable and scientific and secure. It was such a cheerful war. I hated its confidence, its congratulatory anticipations, its optimism of the Stock Exchange. I hated its vile assurance of victory. It was regarded by many as an almost automatic process . . . The note struck from the first was the note of the inevitable; a thing abhorrent to Christians and lovers of liberty.¹¹

Historians have vindicated Chesterton's contemporary view that the cultural divide over South African imperialism was largely a middle class affair. "The nation seemed solid for war," he remembered, but the "apparent unity" was created by the participation of the

¹⁰ Chesterton also wrote two books for the Popular Library of Art published by Duckworth, *G. F. Watts* (1904) and *William Blake* (1910), prefaces for the Everyman reprints of Charles Dickens' novels (later collected as *Appreciations and Criticisms of the Works of Charles Dickens*, 1911), and *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913) for the Home University Library.

¹¹ Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 111-112.

“more influential and instructive groups” in society than by the activity of genuinely popular “jingo mobs.” “Journalism and politics were for the policy of Annexation,” he recalled, and the political press did play more of a role in opposition to the war than even the peace organizations and parliamentary parties.¹² The Unionist government took advantage of the feeling of public unity behind their imperial policy to dissolve parliament and hold England’s first “Khaki election,” and the electoral campaign became a contest between “patriots” and “traitors.” They gained parliamentary seats but hardly the overwhelming mandate that they expected. The middle class was genuinely divided, providing the main body of both the “jingo mobs” and the anti-war movement, and the working class seemed neither enthusiastic about the war nor compelled by anti-war demonstrators’ moral outrage.¹³

During this period of cultural fallout from the war, Chesterton incorporated enough of the socialist critique of progressive Whig history to feel that the ascendancy of British Imperialism and Liberalism was an illusion. As a member of a younger generation than those who began developing the canon of English literature who felt the impact of the divisions over the war, Chesterton saw that the Whig history of English liberalism might need revision if it was to survive the political upheavals of the new century.

¹² Chesterton, *Autobiography* (1936), 111. Arthur Davey, *The British Pro-Boers, 1877-1902* (Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1978), 156-160; 162-7; Davey and Koss both draw attention to the fact that the churches and the press rather than university professors and students led the peace movement (Davey, 160-2; Koss, xxxiv). For a good brief overview of the peace movement see Fred R. Van Hartesveldt, *The Boer War* (Thrupp: Sutton, 2000), “The Pro-Boer Agitation,” 80-93.

¹³ Davey, 116-129; R. Price, *An Imperial War and the British Working Class: Working-Class Attitudes and Reaction to the Boer War* (London, 1972).

The anti-war demonstrators Chesterton joined were an eclectic group of pacifists, socialists, arbitrators, Boer sympathizers, and remnant Gladstonian Little Englanders.¹⁴ The realization that taking the anti-war position potentially exposed one to genuine verbal and physical harassment, loss of political position or commercial clients, or decline of newspaper circulation, inspired a sense of mutual respect among pro-Boers that lasted long after the war, but the divisions of opinion were significant.¹⁵ Chesterton described his role within the movement as belonging to “a minority of a minority.” When the war broke out in 1899, he associated himself with a group known as the Oxford pro-Boers. This group, which included the historian J. L. Hammond, economist Francis Hirst, politician John Simon, and Chesterton’s friends from public school, E. C. Bentley and Lucien Oldershaw, bought the Liberal magazine, *The Speaker*, in order to have an organ for their particular brand of anti-war opinion. They declared themselves Little Englanders rather than pacifists, nationalist in the liberal and romantic tradition rather than humanitarian internationalists.

Chesterton himself remembered rejecting the title “pacifist” and accepting proudly the title “pro-Boer,” originally an epithet thrown by the imperialists, because he objected to humanitarian pacifism that left open the path of peaceful, gradual imperial

¹⁴ For accounts of the Pro-Boers and twentieth-century progressive Little Englanders see Stewart Weaver, “The Pro-Boers: War, Empire, and the Uses of Nostalgia in Turn of the Century England,” George K. Behlmer and Fred M. Leventhal eds. *Singular Continuities: Tradition, Nostalgia, and Identity in Modern British Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), 43-57; Richard Gott, “Little Englanders,” and E. Green and M. Taylor, “Further Thoughts on Little Englandism,” in Raphael Samuel ed. *Patriotism: The Making and Unmaking of British National Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1989).

¹⁵ Davey, 10.

expansion.¹⁶ Writing “On Patriotism” for a collection of Oxford pro-Boer essays, *England: A Nation*, Chesterton argued for a version of English patriotism that played a middle course between the Tories’ “rhetoric of the Union Jack and the Anglo-Saxon blood” and the global “cosmopolitanism” of the Liberal-Imperialists and Socialists. True English patriotism, Chesterton argued, grew from England’s European past with its tradition of small self-governing communities. In Europe, the “only Nationalist civilization,” he wrote, “empires have been the light and transient things,” while “the nations have been the hard and solid and triumphant things, which nothing could break.” If England wanted to flourish as a liberal society she ought to embrace her identity as a small member of the European community of nations.

Chesterton emerged from the obscurity of this “minority within a minority” in 1901 when George Cadbury bought (or as it was said at the time, “captured”) the *Daily News* from the Liberal Imperialists. Cadbury’s acquisition of the *Daily News* was an important step in uniting the anti-war movement’s many voices. Cadbury acted on the urging of the respectable leadership of the peace movement, the South African Conciliation Committee (SACC), which was led by veteran statesman and Liberal Unionist Leonard Courtney, who felt the need for an organ in London and the south of England. The Liberal London *Daily Chronicle* had just abandoned its anti-war position and the new ownership fired its pro-Boer editor Henry Massingham. The Liberal *Echo* went through similar upheaval, leaving the *Morning Leader*, the *Westminster Gazette*, and the *Star* as the only London papers in anti-war hands, none of which could claim

¹⁶ M. van Wyk Smith, *Drummer Hodge: The Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), especially Chapter V, “Protests and Pacifists,” 120-155.

influence comparable to the Conservative *Times* or circulation comparable to the imperialist *Daily Mail*, *Daily Telegraph*, and *Globe*. The most respectable and influential anti-war paper was C.P. Scott's *Manchester Guardian* in the north.

These changes left only W. T. Stead and the Fabians publishing anti-war propaganda in London, but their views hardly represented the full spectrum of anti-war opinion because Stead and the Fabians were not anti-imperialist. Stead, the publicist who initiated the sensationalist 'new journalism' of the 1880s and 90s, led the radical Stop-the-War Movement. His main concern was that Britain's war against "White men and Protestant Christians, like ourselves" would damage Britain's leadership of the great movement of Anglo-Saxon humanitarian imperialism. His shrill anti-war propaganda focused on the atrocities and "methods of barbarism" that discredited British imperialism. In sense if not in style the Fabian socialists' critical support for the war paralleled Stead's. The Fabian Society voted narrowly to support of the war, to the outrage of other socialists like J. A. Hobson (who worked with SACC and the *Manchester Guardian*), H. M. Hyndman of the Social Democratic Federation, and Keir Hardie of the Independent Labour Party. Nevertheless, the Fabian leadership—the Webbs, Shaw, and Chesterton's brother Cecil—like Stead, focused on denouncing the inefficiency and barbarism of the war. Orage's *New Age* and Stanton Coit's *Ethical World* were the main organs of the Fabians' particular brand of socialist and imperialist humanitarianism.

With this disarray in the anti-war press before him, George Cadbury chose A. D. Gardiner as the new editor for the *Daily News*. Gardiner was considered a diplomatic sort who could unite the broad spectrum of opposition voices into "a paper that every true

Christian patriot of every denomination and of none could take up with a certainty that it would plead for righteousness.”¹⁷ Gardiner in turn recruited Chesterton to represent the Oxford pro-Boer perspective in the *Daily News*. Chesterton’s weekly book review column under the heading “The Wars of Literature” beginning in January 1901 was his first forum for reaching a popular audience with his version of English patriotism. It was in his “Wars of Literature” articles, in the midst of the three way fight in the *Daily News* between Oxford pro-Boers, Fabian imperialists, and humanitarian pacifists that Chesterton first began to argue for an appreciation of specific national identities within a “European civilization” against cosmopolitanism and anti-nationalism.

¹⁷ Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London, 1991).

Chapter 1: G. K. Chesterton's *Robert Browning* (1902)

In the midst of churning out weekly reviews and journal articles, Chesterton got his big break. In one of his *Daily News* columns he reviewed *Robert Browning as Religious Teacher*, a book by A. C. Pigou, an economist. In his review, Chesterton objected to Pigou's attempt to reduce the poetry of Robert Browning to an elaborate philosophical expression of Christian socialism. Chesterton believed that Browning was a simple and unoriginal religious thinker. "He expressed normal truths with an abnormal accuracy . . . Every religious writer had echoed the conception that all created things praise the Lord: but Browning was the first to take the thing literally as applying even to the grotesque and unrepresentable." The "obviousness and simplicity" of Browning's religious-poetic vision contrasted sharply, Chesterton went on to say, with "more modern writers of great depth and delicacy, such as Mr. Henry James," whose writings deal with "dim and fugitive and anomalous sentiments." Chesterton's comparison between Robert Browning and Henry James attracted the attention of American readers, to whom this kind of international comparison seemed to have been meat and drink, negotiating, as they were, their own literary history and identity.¹ Chesterton was taken to be challenging a reading of Browning as a philosophical poet and champion of Anglo-American pragmatism and ethical socialism current in Browning Societies, especially in America.

¹ "Notes on Books and Authors," *New York Evening Sun*, September 3, 1901; *New York Evening Post*, August 30, 1901; *New York Tribune*, December 29, 1902.

Very shortly after this article, John Morley invited Chesterton to write the biography of Robert Browning planned for Macmillan's English Men of Letters series.² In choosing Chesterton, Morley, a hero of the Victorian age of classical liberalism, selected a member of the younger generation of literary critics, who had differed from the Browning Society's move towards Christian socialism, to defend Browning and to secure his place in the pantheon of English liberal "greats."³ Literary commentators in the press immediately expressed surprise that Chesterton, a mere journalist with no university degree, should be chosen to contribute to this prestigious series of scholarly biographies.⁴ "Considering that Mr. Chesterton is still under thirty," wrote one journal, "such a commission is a remarkable honour."⁵ Some attributed the commission to Chesterton's place on the staff of such Liberal organs as the *Daily News* and the *Bookman*. "Mr.

² For a description of the English Men of Letters Series as a "consciously designed national monument," see Collini, *English Genealogies*, 355. "Mr. Chesterton's article in our columns on Mr. Pigou's book on Browning will be remembered by our readers," *Daily News*, December 24, 1901; *Western Press Bristol*, December 27, 1901; *Morning Post*, December 13, 1901; *Sunday Sun*, December 13, 1901; *Atheneum*, December 14, 1901; *Observer*, December 15, 1901; *Christian World*, December 19, 1901; *Dundee Advertiser*, *Manchester Despatch*, *Liverpool Post*, *Literary World*, all December 20, 1901; *Academy*, *Court Journal*, *Manchester Guardian*, all December 28, 1901.

³ John Morley himself had written an defense of Browning's romantic liberalism. See John Morley, "On *The Ring and the Book*," *Studies in Literature* (Macmillan, London, 1890), 255-286. It is interesting to note that Chesterton also largely focuses on *The Ring and the Book* for his interpretation of Browning.

⁴ Reviewers of Chesterton's two volumes of verse, *Greybeards at Play* (1900) and *The Wild Knight and Other Poems* (1901, a collection of poems earlier published in the Pro-Boer *Speaker* and *Outlook*), had described Chesterton as heir to the "greater Victorian poets," and especially indebted to Browning for his intellectualism and "literary gargoyles." See *Birmingham Post*, December 21, 1900 and "Books and Authors," *Morning Post*, May 3, 1901.

⁵ *Sketch*, December 24, 1901.

Chesterton has not a good literary style nor has he the compensation of distinctive learning, but he has been commissioned by the Macmillans or by Mr. John Morley—probably because he is of Mr. Morley’s school in politics—to write the *Life of Browning* in the “English Men of Letters” Series.”⁶ One writer quipped, “Mr. Chesterton’s essays in his recent book were all in defense of unpopular causes. Does Mr. Morley regard Browning still as an unpopular cause?”⁷ The publication of *Robert Browning* signaled Chesterton’s “graduation from journalism” and his promotion to the officer corps in the on-going Victorian project of defining a liberal Englishness.⁸

⁶ *Tatler*, May 21, 1902 and *Glasgow Evening News*, September 6, 1902. Notes of expectation of the book appeared throughout the year: 14/6/02 *Preston Guardian*; 27/6/02 *Morning Post*; 28/6/02 *Academy and Literature*; 23/8/02 *Globe*; 5/9/02 *Daily Chronicle*; 8/10/02 *Daily Telegraph*: “Books of the Day: Tennyson and Browning” by W. L. Courtney; 5/12/02 *Times*.

⁷ 21/12/01 *St. James’s Gazette*, and *St. James’s Budget* 27/12/01

⁸ *Three New Humorists*, “...hardly graduated from it, perhaps, for he is still a regular contributor to the *London Daily News*, having the same position on that paper as Mr. Andrew Lang held for a number of years. A sort of go as you please column is conducted in that journal. He writes on any subject that interests him and the way he treats the subject, no matter what it may be, interests his readers.” This article was noted in other papers including, “Three New Humorists in London,” *Chicago Tribune*, August 1, 1903 and *Houston Post*, Texas, USA, August 16, 1903.

See also *Vanity Fair*, May 28, 1903: “[GK] enters with the publication of this volume, on a new phase of his career as a writer; he definitely joins himself to the men of letters as apart from the journalists.” Also *Sunday School Chronicle*, December 31, 1903: [GK managed to] climb—or jump—from journalism into literature with a capital L. [with his *English Men of Letters* biography of Browning and his introduction to the Red Letter Library edition of Oliver Wendell Holmes’s *Autocrat at the Breakfast Table*]; and *Academy and Literature*, December 26, 1903.

Academy and Literature, May 21, 1903; *Pall Mall Gazette*, May 26, 1903: “We are greedily asking “Where is Mr. Chesterton’s Browning?”; *Daily Chronicle*, May 8, 1903, “We are told of the book that it represents the verdict of the younger generation on Browning; and that it is rather more of a disquisition and less of a biography than most in the series”; *Manchester Despatch*, May 30, 1903: “Mr. Gilbert Keith Chesterton . . . whose brilliant monograph on Robert Browning, just now one of the chief topics in

Chesterton thus found himself in the midst of a debate between the older liberal romantic Browningites and the new generation who interpreted Browning as a pragmatist and Christian socialist. Browning Societies had sprouted up in Britain and America since (and even before) the poet's death in 1889. The London Browning Society died out by the turn of the century although many provincial Browning Societies remained; the Boston Browning Society, on the other hand, flourished and attracted such leaders of American thought as John Dewey, Josiah Royce, and William James well into the Edwardian period. These societies hailed Browning as a man of cosmopolitan culture whose appeal lay in his "intellectualism." American Browningites generally admired Browning as the philosophical poet of religious and moral pragmatism proper to an age of secularization and economic progress. As one Browningite put it, the poet "had consecrated his life to the bringing together of the scientific conception of God made necessary by the marvelous discoveries of this century."⁹ Christian socialists and religious pragmatists felt that Browning's poetry made religion philosophically acceptable and socially respectable in a rationalist and scientific age.¹⁰ Browningites

literary circles, well justified Mr. Morley's choice, is a young man still in his twenties . . . [He is] absolutely free of anything approaching party rancour . . . [and] a general favorite"; *Sphere*, June 1903.

⁹ William Pierson Merrill, *Faith and Sight (a study of Tennyson and Browning)*, (New York, 1900), 128-129.

¹⁰ Sidney Herbert Mellone, "Robert Browning," *Leaders of Religious Thought in the Nineteenth Century* (Edinburgh, 1902), John A. Hutton, *Guidance from Robert Browning in Matters of Faith* (Edinburgh, 1903), Dean William Ralph Inge, *Studies of English Mystics* (London, 1906), Frank W. Gunsaulus, "Robert Browning," *The Higher Ministries of Recent English Poetry* (New York, 1907).

admired what they called his “doctrine of imperfection,” the idea of the divine nature progressively revealed itself through the evolution of human nature, which was incomplete, malleable, and striving towards completion. Browning was a kind of icon of those who felt the need for a moral and intellectual elite who could guide humanity’s evolutionary progress. For American Browningites, he was an enlightened European intellectual, recruited to lead the energies of the unformed American masses onwards to their ideal.¹¹

The most striking piece of Browning criticism in the literary landscape when Chesterton wrote his appreciation of the poet was George Santayana’s recent essay in his book *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion*.¹² In his essay on the “Poetry of Barbarism,” originally delivered as a paper for the Boston Browning Society, Santayana challenged Browning’s reputation as a philosophical poet and argued that he could not be used to give intellectual respectability and European roots to American pragmatism. Santayana placed Browning with Walt Whitman as the twin poets the Anglo-American “age of material elaboration” that falls at the end of his narrative of the decay of Western culture from its highest expression in the Homeric age and the neo-Platonic Renaissance. Browning belongs to the modern age, characterized by “the failure of rationality and the indifference to perfection.”

Santayana assumed that the members of the Browning Society shared his sense of a need for an educated cultural elite, and he tells them that Browning is not the ally they

¹¹ Louis Greer, *Browning in America* (1952), Paul Elmer More, “Why is Browning Popular?” 1905, *Shelburne Essays*.

¹² George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900).

thought he would be in their effort to assert their authority as the educators of American society. On the contrary, Browning and Whitman capitulated to the commercial, practical, mass culture of America. Nor is Browning, in Santayana's eyes, a true carrier of the European tradition, because he was impervious to the classicism of the Renaissance and Enlightenment, and the neo-Platonic combination of "the Pagan and the Christian discipline." Although he lived most of his life in Italy, "Browning's insight could never penetrate [the civilized heart of Europe]."

Italy had a religion, and that religion permeated all its life, and was the background without which even its secular art and secular passions would not be truly intelligible. The most commanding and representative, the deepest and most appealing of Italian natures are permeated with this religious inspiration. A Saint Francis, a Dante, a Michel Angelo, breathe hardly anything else. Yet for Browning these men and what they represented may be said not to have existed. He saw, he studied, and he painted a decapitated Italy. His vision could not mount so high as her head.¹³(200)

Browning was, in fact, disappointingly American, Santayana told the Browningites; he bore no marks of the rational civilization of Europe. He lived in Europe like Attila and Alaric, "incapable of understanding its original spirit."¹⁴ The true philosopher of the West "stands by virtue of his superlative genius on the plane of universal reason, far above the passionate experience which he overlooks and on which he reflects." He looks on the world "from the vantage-ground of the intellect." Browning, he says, "had no free speculative faculty." "He had not attained, in studying the beauty of things, that detachment of the phenomenon, that love of the form for its own sake, which is the secret of contemplative satisfaction." Browning was too tied to immediate, sensual experience,

¹³ George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), 200.

¹⁴ George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), 199.

ever to discover the philosophic ideal, which was “the starting-point of a life of a rational worship, of an austere and impersonal religion.”

Browning was also an “American” in his innocence of the “memory of ancient disillusionments” through which the West had progressed. He did not realize that the old pagan philosophical ideals are no longer possible “after the dissolution of that civilization which seemed universal and that empire which had believed itself eternal.” Nor did he grasp that the Christian ideals never really were possible, Santayana says, but survived because Christianity managed “to incorporate many elements of Pagan wisdom, and to accommodate itself to many habits and passions at variance with its own ideal.”¹⁵ Browning’s imagination failed to incorporate this historic progress; he considered his own age as “singular and revolutionary,” capable of returning to any of the ideals of the past. Browning’s revolutionary imagination revealed the extent to which he was disengaged from the vital progressive forces of European history.

Santayana believed that “religion and poetry are identical in essence,” so the decadence in Browning’s poetic imagination was a failure of religious inspiration. American civilization, he wrote, requires a new type of poetic-religious idealization that would surpass the ancient and the Christian “attempts to seize the eternal morphology of reality and describe its unchanging constitution.”¹⁶ But Browning, like Whitman, fails in the necessary “power of idealization.” Both are overpowered by “trivial stimulations coming from vulgar objects,” they fail to universalize from particular objects or persons

¹⁵ George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), 170.

¹⁶ George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), 172.

and remain fatally “indifferent to perfection.”¹⁷ “Browning has no idea of an intelligible good,” Santayana insists. He makes this judgement based on a reading of Browning’s love poetry, which he compares with Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. Browning “never rises to contemplation” of a pure idea. Browning, he says, will not admit that love that has always “another person for its object or its cause” is a weakness. Having lost all ability for rational idealization, Santayana says, Browning joins the American pragmatists in a glorification of the will. They are like relics of a barbarous age, he says, because they regard “passions as their own excuse for being; [and do] not domesticate them either by understanding their cause or by conceiving their goal.” Their religion bears some resemblance to Anglo-American “muscular Christianity” (and Santayana agreed with William James in extending some “indulgent sympathy” towards the “follies of religion” that did not attain to neo-Platonic heights), “but at heart it has far more affinity to the worship of Thor or of Odin than to the religion of the Cross.”¹⁸ Santayana concludes that Browning, like Whitman, like America’s democratic culture in general, is fundamentally unphilosophical, unreligious, unChristian (in the sense of preserving the Platonic strains left in that tradition), and unpoetic.

Numerous contemporary reviewers noticed that Chesterton made use of Santayana’s treatment of Browning and Whitman as the twin barbarian poets of the modern age, but one reviewer went further:

¹⁷ George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), 175, 189.

¹⁸ George Santayana, *Interpretations of Poetry and Religion* (1900), Preface ix, 206.

[Chesterton] alludes with due commendation to Professor Santayana's remarkable essay on Walt Whitman and Browning. He does not intimate, however, that practically his whole thesis—his running comparison of Walt Whitman and Browning, his theory of the grotesque, Browning's insistence on pure passion and manner of speaking from within the storm centre of emotion rather than from without—is merely a larger writing out, with much original comment, to be sure, of Professor Santayana's argument... But what relieves Mr. Chesterton of any charge of intellectual theft is the curious fact that throughout the argument he selects for praise just the points that Professor Santayana gave warrant for final condemnation.¹⁹

Chesterton's reliance on Santayana's thesis is by no means so obvious, nor so simple, as the reviewer suggests. One would look in vain, for example, for a "running comparison of Walt Whitman and Browning" in Chesterton's book or a refutation of that comparison. But Chesterton does engage Santayana's "placing" of Browning in a larger context of literary and cultural history:

[Santayana], in contradistinction to the vast mass of Browning admirers, had discovered what was the real root virtue of Browning's poetry; and the curious thing is, that having discovered that root virtue, he thinks it a vice . . . Mr. Santayana is, perhaps, the most valuable of all the Browning critics. He has gone out of his way to endeavor to realise what it is that repels him in Browning, and he has discovered . . . the merit that none of Browning's admirers have discovered.²⁰

Where Santayana portrays Browning as a sign of the vulgar Americanization to come, Chesterton see Browning as a sign of the continuing vitality, in English liberal romanticism, of a continuous European democratic tradition. Chesterton's *Robert Browning* reclaimed the poet for England, portraying him, as one reviewer noted, as the "primeval Englishman"²¹ who embodies the religious *and* democratic spirit of Europe.²²

¹⁹ "A Work marked by Incessant Rattling of Intellectual Surprises," *New York Evening Post*, July 22, 1903.

²⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 183-184.

²¹ Court Circular, June 13, 1903.

Chesterton conceives of the European tradition as something quite different from Santayana's neo-Platonic philosophical tradition. He avoided applying the term Christian to the tradition Browning represents in his text, apparently uncertain how to navigate conflicting definitions of Christian philosophy. This drew a good deal of negative criticism from reviewers, even from his friend and editor, W. Robertson Nicoll, who wrote, in an otherwise glowing review, that Chesterton "deliberately shirks the problem that must be faced: the problem of Browning's relation to Christianity."²³ Reviewers demanded that the public be made aware of Browning's debt to English Nonconformity. "Mr. Chesterton ignores the fact that both Browning and his wife were convinced dissenters . . . The Christianity of Browning and his wife was a Christianity which could only have grown up at that time in Nonconformity."²⁴

Browning—both Brownings in fact—stand with Milton as products of the life of the British Free Churches. Browning was an Independent and served as a church officer in the independent church in Florence. He was not a preacher, yet it is only by the knowledge of the true thought of the Free Churches that his point of view can be understood. In justice to the greatest of the modern English poets this should have been fully stated.²⁵

²² For an earlier discussion of Walt Whitman see G. K. Chesterton, "Is there a school of Walt Whitman?" *Daily News*, November 11, 1901. (Chesterton also refers to Whitman's *Leave of Grass* in the dedicatory poem in *The Man Who Was Thursday* (1908) as being influential in his own intellectual development).

²³ W. Robertson Nicoll, "The Correspondence of Claudius Clear," *British Weekly*, May 21, 1903.

²⁴ W. Robertson Nicoll, "The Correspondence of Claudius Clear," *British Weekly*, May 21, 1903.

²⁵ *Christian World*, Boston, MA, July 4, 1903.

Chesterton seems to have avoided adjudicating between Santayana's idea of a Christian Platonic tradition and the Browningites doctrine of Christian pragmatism by not using the word Christian at all for Browning's religious spirit. But this discriminating spirit did not satisfy reviewers:

The whole volume is written in a "God-intoxicated" spirit of wonder. Nowhere, however, does Mr. Chesterton state that Browning was a Christian or a Dissenter; surely amazing omissions. He gives every reason for Browning's optimism but the right one, viz., his belief that Jesus Christ elucidated, if he did not solve, the riddle of existence. To write of Browning as Theist instead of a Christian Theist is enough to make the poet rise from the dead before the day of judgment.²⁶

It is true that in the text Chesterton identifies Browning's poetic insight as religious but does not link it to the English dissenting tradition. Browning's religious insight is revealed in his love of the grotesque, he says, and its source is English culture, Italian culture, European culture generally. His "primeval and indivisible" response to the grotesque is not one of revulsion and escape into religious sublimation, but a response of passionate interest and love. "He is the great poet of human joy for precisely the reason of which Mr. Santayana complains: that his happiness is primal, and beyond the reach of philosophy. He is something far more convincing, far more comforting, far more religiously significant than an optimist: he is a happy man." (186) Chesterton dismisses the term "optimist," taken from a Victorian discussion of religious belief as a matter of temperament or emotional constitution; faced with the depravity of the world and the sinfulness of man, one responded with optimism (faith) or pessimism (doubt). Chesterton hesitates, from personal uncertainty or from a sense that he differed with his readers'

²⁶ "R. M. S.", *Examiner*.

definition of Christianity, to call Browning's religious insight "Christian" because it did not begin with this primary sense of depravity and move to faith through theodicy, which may have been what Santayana had in mind when he defined Christianity as "the religion of the Cross."²⁷ He does not directly engage Santayana's argument that Browning's poetry was un-Christian but he insists that it can be "religious" without being Platonic. Santayana says that the "religious" or philosophic poets find joy in the beauty of perfect or idealized form, and Chesterton defends Browning's greater joy in the existence of even ugly and vulgar things. "Nature," Chesterton says, "has the power of convincing most poets of the essential worthiness of things," but human nature in the grotesque contortions of its freedom and weakness do not often inspire poets with a sense of "the absolute sanctity" of their existence, but Browning captured this poetic-religious insight.

Browning was therefore to be hailed as the poet of democracy, the "poet of towns." Chesterton considers Browning's poetic vision "religious," but the word he uses

²⁷ Chesterton revealed elsewhere his sense that his definition of Christianity was at odds with that of some of his readers. See for example, G. K. Chesterton, "Book of the Day: The Ideals of Albert Durer," *Daily News*, February 9, 1905, [signed review of T. Sturge Moore, *Albert Durer* (Duckworth and Co.)]

A man whose ideas are identical with those of his readers—that is to say, a man whose ideas are conventional or threadbare—can plunge in media res with a splash. He can talk about Albert Durer in his relation to Christianity, or Albert Durer in his relation to the Renaissance . . . easily and without turning a hair. For he knows that he means the same thing by Christianity as his readers mean by it, the same thing by the renaissance.

Chesterton did not engage in religious controversy in this book. One can, however, see the outlines of his position, derived from what he described as his vaguely Unitarian upbringing and his wife's Anglo-Catholicism, and later clarified through public controversy with Robert Blatchford and others: the true English religious spirit did not spring from a reformed or dissenting theology of total depravity but retained the Catholic or "orthodox" understanding of the primordial goodness and freedom of human nature.

for it is “Liberal” rather than Christian. Chesterton had argued similarly in an article on Walt Whitman.

It is extraordinarily little noticed that the French Revolution was a religious movement; it was mystical, for it rested on the absolute sanctity of a dirty French peasant, who did not look at all sacred to the gross, material eye . . . The latest school of Rationalists assert vigorously that democracy contradicts nature, not perceiving that that is precisely why it was the last of the great spiritual movements of mankind.²⁸

He would not have agreed with a reviewer who thought that “not to mention that [Browning] was a Christian is as unpardonable as not to mention that he was an Englishman.” Chesterton was more concerned in this biography to establish that Browning’s democratic liberalism was at the core of Englishness than to identify its origins in a particular theological tradition. For the moment he was willing to refer vaguely to “that queer, beautiful, laughable thing, the English religious feeling, so hazy, so reverent, so illogical, so humane, so kindly, so vulgar.”²⁹

Browning was not merely a Liberal Englishman. In Chesterton’s book, it is his Liberalism that makes him English. The movement of the book is away from a racial definition of Englishness and towards an identification of the English spirit with an awkward combination of the liberalism of the Whig Revolution and the French Revolution. Chesterton opens by dismissing the speculations of earlier biographers about Browning’s alien ancestry. Chesterton says that theories that Browning was descended from Italian, Jewish, Irish, or gypsy ancestors are simply irrelevant to determining his national identity. “We do not want to know about a man like Browning, whether he had a

²⁸ G. K. Chesterton, “An Astonishing American,” *Daily News*, August 7, 1901.

²⁹ *The Bystander*, June 1, 1904.

right to a shield used in the Wars of the Roses, or whether the tenth grandfather of his Creole grandmother had been white or black,” but rather, Chesterton explains, “what manner of people his had been for the last two or three generations.” “It is a great deal easier to hunt a family from tombstone to tombstone back to the time of Henry II than to catch and realise and put upon paper that most nameless and elusive of all things—social tone.”³⁰ Chesterton searches for that “nameless and elusive” quality that constitutes national identity and that cannot be reduced to racial inheritance. “Browning’s descent from barons, or Jews, or lackeys, or black men, is not the main point touching his family. If the Brownings were of mixed origin, they were so much the more like the great majority of English middle-class people.”³¹ Race, Chesterton says, has been a red herring in the search to understand Browning’s relation to the English spirit. “There is hardly a family in Camberwell that has not a story or two about foreign marriages a few generations back.” Chesterton refuses to investigate or adjudicate between contending theories about Browning’s “alien blood,” saying that “alien blood, by the paradox we have observed, may have made him more characteristically a native” to England. It may have made him more liberal-minded and interested in human diversity, and therefore more characteristically English. But then, Chesterton says, jokingly turning that thought on its head, “if [Browning] was related to every people in which he was interested, he must have been of extraordinarily mixed extraction.”³²

³⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 5.

³¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 7.

³² G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 4.

Browning's democratic liberalism was native to England, Chesterton argued. It was part of the spiritual inheritance of the "typical Englishman of the middle class." The phrase "typical Englishman of the middle class" is reiterated throughout the chapter like the W. S. Gilbert refrain, so much so that one American review of the book was headlined "Bourgeois Bob Browning." English liberalism descended from the moral vision of the "old-fashioned humanitarians of the eighteenth century" that combined the moral teaching of religious dissenters and an aristocratic tradition of courtesy and equality among peers. In Browning's case, Chesterton says, this particular combination was embodied in his mother who came from Scotland, "one of the very few countries where large sections of the aristocracy are Puritans," a dual dignity that gave dual force to their moral perspective.

Chesterton devotes an unusual amount of space to a discussion of Browning's early play, *Strafford*, in order to expound on Browning's (and his own) combination of old Whig and French revolutionary liberalism. He takes Browning's choice and treatment of the subject of the struggle between Pym and Strafford to be "one of the very earliest of the really important works in English literature which are based on the Parliamentary reading of the incident of the time of Charles I." Browning's radical reinterpretation of English history, Chesterton says, was inspired by his incorporation of the ideals of the French Revolution. Newly fired by the liberal spirit sweeping the continent, Browning could recognize Strafford's attempt to create a "great English official despotism" as "a kind of disease of public spirit." Chesterton uses his discussion of *Strafford* to make the point that "Royalists or Imperialists, or even Socialists" have been misguided in their devotion to the public welfare.

They represent, as it were, the drunkenness of responsibility. It is when men begin to grow desperate in their love for the people, when they are overwhelmed by the difficulties and blunders of humanity, that they fall back upon a wild desire to manage everything themselves. Their faith in themselves is only a disillusionment with mankind.³³

This liberal political lesson, Chesterton says, was worthy of Browning, who “could never keep politics altogether out of his dramatic work.”³⁴ The democratic spirit of the French Revolution enhanced or revived the sturdy Whig liberalism in England. Chesterton points out the danger of admiring Browning “as the great Victorian poet, who lived long enough to have opinions on Mr. Gladstone’s Home Rule Bill” and forgetting that he was “born in the afterglow of the great French Revolution.” Chesterton reminds his readers that like many of the Victorians of the “older generation” Browning had been set on fire with the romantic optimism of a “strict republican orthodoxy.” The spirit of the French Revolution was revealed in England in her literary history:

Numbers of the great men, who afterwards illuminated the Victorian era, were at this time living in mean streets in magnificent daydreams. Ruskin was solemnly visiting his solemn suburban aunts; Dickens was going to and fro in a blacking factory; Carlyle, slightly older, was still lingering on a poor farm in Dumfriesshire; Keats had not long become the assistant of the country surgeon when Browning was a boy in Camberwell. On all sides there was the first beginning of the aesthetic stir on the middle classes which expressed itself in the combination of so many poetic lives with so many prosaic livelihoods. It was the age of inspired office-boys.

Liberalism, Chesterton says, was “inevitably involved in the poet’s whole view of existence.”

By “liberalism” Chesterton meant “a belief in growth and energy and in the ultimate utility of error,” and therefore the value of each human person’s contribution,

³³ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 31.

³⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 32.

however feeble or seemingly unworthy, to the life of society. It was a view of human history that refused to be overawed by great failures or powerful historic tendencies, which did not see history as the story of humanity's progressive disillusionment (as Santayana had formulated it), but as the story of eclectic accumulation of evidences for faith and hope. "A Liberal may be defined approximately as a man who, if he could by waving his hand in a dark room, stop the mouths of all the deceivers of mankind for ever, would not wave his hand."

Chesterton argued that Browning's epic poem, *The Ring and the Book*, was the greatest epic of modernity because the form of the poem embodies the spirit of liberalism. In *The Ring and the Book* Browning elaborates a story taken from criminal record of Guido Franceschini's trial for the murder of his wife Pompilia in the seventeenth century. Through a series of soliloquies, each player in the drama retells the story from their perspective. Chesterton argues that this form makes *The Ring and the Book* the "epic of free speech." "The poet in his ancient office held a kind of terrestrial day of judgement, and gave men halters or haloes; Browning gives men neither halter not halo, he gives them voices." The poem "is the expression of the belief that no man ever lived upon this earth without possessing a point of view. No one ever lived who had not a little more to say for himself than any formal system of justice was likely to say for him." Chesterton has a deep reverence for this liberal belief: it is not a facile tolerance. The principle of free speech is "the step of deciding, in the face of many serious dangers and disadvantages, to let everybody talk," a step that requires, Chesterton says, a "terrible

magnanimity and patience.” He admired Browning for his “faith” in liberalism despite his clear grasp of its potential failure.

It is not by any means self-evident upon the face of it that an institution like the liberty of speech is right or just. It is not natural or obvious to let a man utter follies and abominations which you believe to be bad for mankind any more than it is natural or obvious to let a man dig up a part of the public road, or infect half a town with typhoid fever. The theory of free speech, that truth is so much larger and stranger and more many-sided than we know of, that it is very much better at all costs to hear everyone’s account of it, is a theory which has been justified upon the whole by experiment, but which remains a very daring and even a very surprising theory.³⁵

Chesterton endorses this liberal creed of free speech as a “noble and salutary doctrine, far less dangerous than its opposite.”

Every one on this earth should believe, amid whatever madness or moral failure, that his life and temperament have some object on the earth . . . The evil wrought by this mystical pride, great as it often is, is like a straw to the evil wrought by a materialistic self-abandonment. The crimes of the devil who thinks himself of immeasurable value are as nothing to the crimes of the devil who thinks himself of no value.³⁶

These passages on Browning’s liberalism were reprinted in over two hundred reviews in British and American journals over the course of 1903 and 1904, and gained Chesterton a reputation as a champion of liberalism.³⁷

³⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 174.

³⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 202.

³⁷ Chesterton’s *Browning* would be received as part of the move to make free speech as one of the primary rights of Englishmen a rallying cry for the Pro-Boer movement against the government. See Fred R. Van Hartesveldt, *The Boer War* (2000), 85.

Chesterton rewrote Browning's liberalism as part of a European tradition, arguing, in contrast to Santayana, that Browning's Liberalism made him genuinely at home in Italy. The dichotomy he draws between the cultivated American traveler and Browning pointedly undermines Santayana's critique of Browning for failing to appreciate the neo-Platonic idealism of Renaissance Italy.

It is well known that Browning loved Italy; that it was his adopted country; that he said in one of his finest lyrics that the name of it would be written on his heart. But the character of his love for Italy needs to be understood. There are thousands of educated Europeans who love Italy, who live in it, who visit it annually, who come across a continent to see it, who hunt out its darkest picture and its most mouldering carving; but they are all united in this, that they regard Italy as a dead place. It is a branch of their universal museum, a department of dry bones. There are rich and cultivated persons, particularly Americans, who seem to think that they keep Italy, as they might keep an aviary or a hothouse, into which they might walk whenever they wanted a whiff of beauty. Browning did not feel at all in this manner; he was intrinsically incapable of offering such an insult to the soul of a nation... He was interested in the life in Italian art and in the life in Italian politics.³⁸

"Italy to Browning and his wife was not by any means merely that sculptured and ornate sepulchre that it is to so many of those cultivated English men and women who live in Italy and enjoy and admire and despise it." Browning's love for Italy was not an "antiquarian fancy; it was a love of a living thing," for "the essence and individuality of the country itself." The Brownings recognized in Italy the liberal spirit of England; they considered Italy "the type and centre of the religion and politics of a continent; the ancient and flaming heart of Western history; the very Europe of Europe." It was the recognition of the liberal soul of European nations that "made so thorough a Scotchman

³⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 82.

as Carlyle in love with Germany, and so thorough an Englishman as Browning in love with Italy.”³⁹

This idea of a commonality between the English and Italians reappeared in an article Chesterton wrote for the *Daily News* the same year that *Robert Browning* was published. “The old Liberal idea of a sympathy between the love of liberty in England and the love of liberty in Italy was not a maudlin mistake; it was sound sense, like most of the old ideas of Liberals, especially before they began to listen to the unscientific rubbish about Teutons and Latins.”⁴⁰ The “lounging and liberty” in England and Italy, so different from the order and discipline that characterized Germany and France, led them to have a common religious sensibility, a “mysticism, a love of strange symbols.” Italians, Chesterton wrote, tend to espouse “a sort of Catholicism to which we English are more perilously prone.” The English are drawn to a religion suffused with “sentiment, colours, and perfumes, an atmosphere, an emotion.” The materialistic tendency in English and Italian religion, as opposed to a misguided rationalism, Chesterton argues, bred a love of liberty.⁴¹

³⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 87.

⁴⁰ G. K. Chesterton, “The Saint,” *The Bookman*, July 1906 [a signed review of *The Saint* by Antonio Fogazzaro (Hodder and Stoughton)]. See also G. K. Chesterton, “Book of the Day. An American View of Mystics,” *Daily News*, May 13, 1909 [signed review of Rufus M. Jones, *Studies in Mystical Wisdom*, (Macmillan and Co.)].

⁴¹ G. K. Chesterton, “A Book of the Day. A Victorian on Victorian Poetry,” *Daily News*, February 13, 1907, [signed review: *The Main Tendencies of Victorian Poetry*, Arnold Smith]

[Arnold Smith] is soaked in the English century of which he writes . . . The one weakness of Mr. Arnold Smith’s criticism is that he does isolate the Victorian age and make it a universe by itself, a universe in which he lives and moves . . . This was the real evil of the English Victorian age—that it became isolated from the past and the main life of European

Chesterton describes Italy's national "essence and individuality" as an amateur and liberal spirit. Chesterton notes that Browning was himself a "strenuous amateur" in his attitude to art and to life. "A man must love a thing very much if he not only practices it without any hope of fame or money, but even practices it without any hope of doing it well."⁴² Browning, he says, was to the end of his life trying his hand at things he would never master, "absurd little ingenuities," the miscellaneous output of a "fruitless vivacity." This common domesticity and love of hobbies was one more sign of a common European heritage of liberalism.

G. K. Chesterton's response to George Santayana's interpretation of Browning changed the terms on which the Victorian poet was read.⁴³ After their exchange Browning was viewed as a more or less successful poet of modernity and the romantic age of liberal revolutions, rather than as a philosophic poet of "the great reaction in favor of monarchy, aristocracy and ecclesiasticism." One of Chesterton's reviewer's believed that he made it clear that "the real Browning was quite a different person from the grim moralist and metaphysician who is seen through the spectacles of Browning Societies and

civilization. Britain is a geographical island, but it need not have become a moral island . . . He still fails to realise entirely what Browning stood for because he refuses, like most critics of the period, to look back at the chain of religious history . . . What Browning really stands for is a thing rooted back in what Mr. Arnold Smith calls, with quaint archaism, "the darkness of the Middle Ages."

⁴² G. K. Chesterton, *Robert Browning* (1902), 84.

⁴³ Patricia O'Neill, *Robert Browning and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (1995), Boyd Litzinger, *Time's Revenges: Browning's Reputation as Thinker, 1889-1962* (1964).

University Extension Lecturers.” It became a common place to quote Chesterton to the effect that “Browning was born in the afterglow of the great Revolution,” and to pose the question of critical judgement along the lines he had set down: “How much did Browning do, with his professed liberalism, to carry on the fine flower of Shelley for a new “Eden of dignity, liberty and love”?”⁴⁴ Browning’s essential Englishness was—not a racial identity—but a cultural “personality” derived from a European tradition of democratic liberalism that encompassed the British Whig and the French revolutionary elements. Chesterton put the idea that the spirit of the French Revolution was alive in England, that the “Latin” cultures of Europe and the culture of England grew from common roots and blossomed with similar flowers, and that Englishness was not to be defined against Frenchness on the table in discussions of English national identity at the turn of the century. In redefining Englishness in this way in *Robert Browning* in 1902, Chesterton revealed a certain prescience about the direction the country was heading, considering the 1904 entente with France. He continued to popularize the idea of a literary liberal Englishness in the following years, especially in his second major literary biography, *Charles Dickens*.

⁴⁴ J. H. Dillard, *Public*, Chicago, August 22, 1903.

Chapter 2: G. K. Chesterton's *Charles Dickens* (1906)

Chesterton remembered his *Robert Browning* as a book that explored the Victorian liberal idealism of his own boyhood, “a book in which the name of Browning was introduced from time to time, I might almost say with considerable art, or at any rate with some decent appearance of regularity.”¹ In *Charles Dickens* also Chesterton worked out a defense of this cherished version of liberalism, perhaps with even greater success. Arthur Waugh, the director of the Dickens publishing house Chapman and Hall for two decades, noted when the book was published that “temperamentally [Chesterton] is much more a Dickensian than a Browningite; and in consequence his book upon Dickens is a much sounder and suggestive piece of work.”² Chesterton's *Browning* was the “typical Englishman of the middle class” with the soul of a nineteenth-century European liberal; Chesterton's *Dickens* was a “sturdy, sentimental English Radical with a large heart and a narrow mind.”³ Dickens's work even more than Browning's served as a vehicle for Chesterton's attempt to redefine Englishness as one national expression of a larger European tradition of democratic liberalism.

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography* (1936). Chesterton also recalled in his *Autobiography* that his parents took him as a child to hear the sermons of Stopford Brooke, who was at the forefront of popularizing the Whig interpretation of English literature with his best-selling *A Primer of English Literature*. See Collini, *English Past*, 354.

² Waugh also considered Chesterton's book on Dickens “the best that has been said or written upon the greatest novelist of the Victorian Era.” Arthur Waugh, *Daily Chronicle*, September 6, 1906.

³ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London, 1906), 122.

As with Robert Browning, he linked Dickens, as a legend of English literary history, with the French Revolution, in an attempt to overturn the dichotomy between the British Isles and the Continent, the English and the French, the stability of the British Constitution and the revolutions of the nineteenth century, and unite the whiggish and revolutionary strains of liberalism into a single, more “sturdy” liberal tradition. The nineteenth century in English literary history became “the age under the shadow of the French Revolution, the age in which Dickens was born” and 1870 became “the year Paris fell and Dickens died.”⁴ Against those who saw the democratic radicalism of continental liberalism as something inherently foreign, Chesterton argued, Dickens revealed that “imperialism is foreign, socialism is foreign, militarism is foreign, education is foreign, strictly even Liberalism is foreign. But Radicalism was our own; as English as the hedge-rows.”⁵

Chesterton organized the book around a division between Dickens’s early and late novels with 1850 representing a “Time of Transition.” “The difference between the books from the beginning up to *Dombey [and Son]*, and the books from *David Copperfield* to the end may be hard to state dogmatically, but is evident to every one with any literary sense.”⁶ Chesterton argued that Dickens moved away from the art of caricature and melodramatic exaggeration that expressed his early democratic faith towards the more modern practice of realism that revealed his growing pessimism about the ability of the

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London, 1906), 12.

⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London, 1906), 119.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London, 1906), 137.

people to govern themselves. The book is not evenly divided between the two phases, however, as Chesterton devotes the first seven chapters to describing Dickens's caricature art and brand of English radicalism. He rather summarily dismisses the later Dickens in one chapter, "Later Life and Works," in which he argues that the transition away from the old English radicalism occurred as Dickens came under the influence of Thomas Carlyle's theory of history and dramatic vision of the French Revolution.⁷ In the final two chapters, "Great Dickens Characters" and "On the Alleged Optimism of Dickens," he points out that relics of the "essential" Dickens can be found even in the later works. The heart of Chesterton's argument unfolds in two chapters which form a kind of diptych at the center of the book, "Dickens and America" and "Dickens and Christmas," in which he explains the relationship of Dickens's English radicalism to American liberalism on the one hand and European liberalism on the other.

George Gissing's *Charles Dickens, a Critical Study* (1898) provided Chesterton with a kind of foil for his own study of Dickens. Chesterton calls Gissing the "soundest of Dickens critics" because he rescued Dickens from those who considered him nothing more than a bourgeois sentimentalist and drew attention to the note of social criticism in Dickens's novels.⁸ Nevertheless, Chesterton disagreed with Gissing who identified Dickens's later novels as the site of his most radical social criticism. Chesterton thought

⁷ See William Oddie, *Dickens and Carlyle: the Question of Influence* (London, 1972). Oddie, who has written on Chesterton, could be drawing his interest in this subject from a reading of Chesterton.

⁸ See for example, "The Limitations of Dickens," Henry James (1865) and "Dickens in Relation to Criticism," George Henry Lewes (1872), collected in *The Dickens Critics*, ed. by George H. Ford and Lauriat Lane (New York, 1961).

that Gissing failed to appreciate the English radicalism of the early Dickens because he was steeped in the same late Victorian tradition of Carlyle-inspired enthusiasm for German literature and political thought that had effected Dickens.⁹

Chesterton believed that Dickens's greatness lay in his implicit acceptance of a whiggish version of history of English liberalism, despite the fact that "in theory at any rate, he had no adequate conception of the importance of human tradition."¹⁰ The problem with the later Victorian and Edwardian liberals, Chesterton thought, was that they forgot the roots of English liberalism in a long European past. Dickens, on the other hand, awoke to a whiggish sense of England's liberal tradition during his travels in America.

Dickens was not in the main lines of the Victorian Whig interpretation of England's history. He saw England, not as a nation where freedom slowly broadened from precedent to precedent, but as "a rubbish heap of seventeenth-century bad habits abandoned by everybody else."¹¹ In the wake of the French Revolution, when "the whole of our Christian civilization had been startled from its sleep by trumpets to take sides in a bewildering Armageddon," and "Germany and Austria found themselves on the side of

⁹ The Chestertonian defense of Dickens's bourgeois sentimentalist brand of radicalism against any kind of ideological reading of Dickens is ultimately very similar to the Orwellian defense of Dickens, which extremely ironic, considering Orwell's criticism of Chesterton's Dickens criticism.

¹⁰ Chesterton, "Christmas Books," *Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens* (1911).

¹¹ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London, 1906), 103.

the old order, France and America on the side of the new," he saw that England's reaction was more equivocal.

England, as at the Reformation, took up eventually a dark middle position, maddeningly difficult to define. She created a democracy, but she kept an aristocracy: she reformed the House of Commons, but left the magistracy (as it is still) a mere league of gentlemen against the world. But underneath all this doubt and compromise there was in England a great and perhaps growing mass of dogmatic democracy; certainly thousands, probably millions expected a Republic in fifty years.

Dickens followed for a time the trend among these English "dogmatic democrats," which was "to look across the Atlantic to where lay a part of ourselves already Republican, the van of the advancing English on the road to liberty." British liberals "enormously idealized America," Chesterton said. "On the other hand, to the Americans, fresh from their first epic of arms, the defeated mother country, with its coronets and county magistrates, was only a broken feudal keep."¹² Dickens himself, Chesterton says, "looked at England almost with the eyes of an American democrat."¹³

Dickens's travels in America, however, transformed his vision of England. In his *American Notes* and *Martin Chuzzlewit* he rebuked what he considered the Americans' foolish complacency about the uniqueness, originality, and strength of American liberalism. He satirized American society as "not being Liberal enough" in comparison with European society, which expressed its liberalism naturally in habits of thought and action. Chesterton argued that Dickens's American satires expressed his recognition that

¹² G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (London, 1906), 102.

¹³ Chesterton sums up in a phrase an aspect of Dickens' work that Dickens scholars are only now beginning to fully account for. Malcolm Andrews, for example, argues that critics have underestimated the extent of Dickens' literary debt to Washington Irving's writings about England. "Dickens, Washington, Irving, and English National Identity," *Dickens Studies Annual* 29:1-16.

lacking a historical sense of the origins of their liberalism eventually destroyed the liberal spirit.

In the nineteenth century, Chesterton says, Americans developed a narrative of their revolution in which the Anglo-Saxon race overturned the corrupt traditions and institutions of European civilization to achieve a purity of liberalism unknown before. Their patriotic history thus isolated them from the liberal patriotism of all other nations. “The thing which is rather foolishly called the Anglo-Saxon civilization is at present soaked through with a weak pride,” Chesterton wrote. The idea of “Anglo-Saxon superiority” led them to “see the world divided into Saxons and non-Saxons, into our splendid selves and the rest.” Dickens warned that it was dangerous for liberals to forget the complex European tradition out of which their liberalism grew. If a liberal patriot came to believe that a single revolution achieved or could achieve liberty as a historic reality, he would cease to notice, mind, or hope to gradually reform minor corruptions of liberty. “In the eighteenth century, in the making of modern politics, a ‘patriot’ meant a discontented man. It was opposed to the word ‘courtier,’ which meant an upholder of present conditions.” Liberal patriotism had to be whiggish rather than revolutionary, because liberalism reveals itself primarily in hopes for the continuous reform of the nation according to a human ideal, and therefore differed fundamentally from racial nationalism.

Chesterton expresses his argument that Dickens saw English liberalism as essentially a cultural relic of European Christendom most fully expressed in the chapter

“Dickens and Christmas.” Chesterton juxtaposes Dickens’s travelogue, *Pictures from Italy*, with his beloved stories of Christmas set in the fog and darkness of London. Chesterton notes that Dickens’s *Pictures from Italy* reveals no particular interest in “the Roman legend, the ancient life of the Mediterranean, the world-old civilization of the vine and olive, the mystery of the immutable Church.” He takes this apparent lack of interest or appreciation as a sign of Dickens’s “unconscious relation to our European past.” Dickens knew the monuments of European civilization as the familiar English things, he says, and did not need to go abroad to discover them. Dickens reveals the true relationship between England and Europe by “taking to heart the streets, as it were, rather than the spires of the Continent.” The old traditional things are a shared heritage among all European nations, Chesterton says, and it is only the novelties in each that represent national peculiarities.

It is for the sake of the streets and the shops and the coats and hats, that we should go abroad; they are far better worth going to see than the castles and cathedrals and Roman camps. For the wonders of the world are the same all over the world, at least all over the European world. Castles that throw valleys in shadow, minsters that strike the sky, roads so old they seems to have been made by the gods, these are in all Christian counties.

For Chesterton, Dickens expressed an essential truth about English national identity in his travel writings by ignoring the historic sights of Europe and writing about the oddities of daily life, acting on the principle that “exactly the things that do strike the traveler as extraordinary are the ordinary things, the food, the clothes, the vehicles; the strange things are cosmopolitan, the common things are national and peculiar.”¹⁴

¹⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 10. Chesterton dismisses the dichotomy drawn between the sunny Mediterranean land and England in *Little Dorrit* as overly stagey to be taken as a real guide to Dickens’ idea of national cultures. Chesterton argues that the two foreigners in the novel, the villainous Frenchman and the vivacious

Chesterton finds the most striking symbol of the resonance in Dickens' mind between English and European culture in the fact that Dickens was inspired to write his "tales of Christmas in English towns" while travelling through Italy.¹⁵ "The sunlight of the southern world" awakened in Dickens his memory of "the firelight of the north," and he expressed his "unconscious relation" to England's Christian past in the Christmas stories, revealing to his readers the warmth of the south that survived in the midst of the "very foulness and smoke of London." Seeing the ancient Christianity of the south, Dickens was not captivated as with something new and foreign, Chesterton said. Rather he was inspired to express his unconscious allegiance to the ancient Christianity of England. Dickens expressed "real tradition of 'Merry England'" that endured in the nineteenth century, as opposed to efforts of "the pallid medievalists who thought they were reviving it."

The Pre-Raphaelites, the Gothicists, the admirers of the Middle Ages, had in their subtlety and sadness the spirit of the present day. Dickens had in his buffoonery and bravery the spirit of the Middle Ages. He was much more medieval in his attacks on medievalism than they were in their defences of it. It was he who had the things of Chaucer, the love of large jokes and long stories and brown ale and all the white roads of England.¹⁶

Dickens wrote about Christmas because he was a populist, a mirror for popular culture and popular sympathies, not because of any bourgeois romantic antiquarianism.¹⁷ "It was

Italian, were inspired from "the faces of two London organ-grinders" rather than drawn from Dickens' travels abroad.

¹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 121.

¹⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 124.

¹⁷ Chesterton, "Christmas Books," *Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens* (1911).

by a great ancestral instinct that he defended Christmas; by that sacred subconsciousness which is called tradition, which some have called a dead thing, but which is really more living than the intellect.”¹⁸

It is also in the Christmas books, Chesterton says, that Dickens most clearly revealed his radicalism. Chesterton’s discussion of *The Chimes* and *The Christmas Carol* turns into a discussion of the failure of democratic radicalism in the socialists and New Liberals. He describes Dickens’ Christmas books as “Christmas war songs,” “stern and fighting,” “militant” attacks on “vulgar Benthamism” in their concerns for “efficiency” in social welfare reform.

The things the poor hate are the modern things, the rationalistic things—doctors, inspectors, poor law guardians, professional philanthropy When, in “The Christmas Carol,” Scrooge refers to the surplus population, the Spirit tells him, very justly, not to speak till he knows what the surplus is and where it is. The implication is severe but sound. When a group of superciliously benevolent economists look down into the abyss for the surplus population, assuredly there is only one answer to be given them; and that is to say, “If there is a surplus, you are a surplus.” And if anyone were ever cut off, they would be. If barricades went up in our streets and the poor became masters, I think the priests would escape, I fear the gentlemen would; but I believe the gutters would be simply running with the blood of philanthropists.¹⁹

Chesterton’s argument was that the “Christmas Dickens” revealed that while European liberalism may have derived a memory of the idea of equality from Roman republicanism, Chesterton said, liberalism’s greatest impulse came from the teachings of the Christian tradition.

¹⁸ Chesterton, “Christmas Books,” *Criticisms and Appreciations of the Works of Charles Dickens* (1911).

¹⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 134. Contemporary reviewers quoted and reprinted this passage more than any other section of the book.

Just as Christianity looked for the honest man inside a thief, democracy looked for the wise man inside the fool . . . [The liberal tradition] was full of faith in the infinity of human souls, which is in itself not only Christian but orthodox . . . Christianity said that any man could be a saint if he chose; democracy said any man could be a citizen if he chose . . . And in England and literature its living expression was Dickens.²⁰

Chesterton's celebration of the Dickensian Christmas is, thus, the center of his argument, where nineteenth-century England reveals its secret whiggish connection, not to an Anglo-Saxon past, but to a Roman-Christian past that unites it to the rest of Europe.

Dickens's "full faith in the infinity of human souls" expressed itself in the art of the grotesque, as it had in Robert Browning's poetry. Chesterton understood Dickens' art as a caricaturist to be democratic because he used it to reveal that under oppression the human spirit twists itself into grotesque shapes, but does not die. In the chapter entitled "The Great Popularity," Chesterton attributes Dickens' popularity above all to his ability to create such a variety and multiplicity of characters, each with an undying individuality.

Dickens was a mythologist rather than a novelist . . . He did not always manage to make his characters men, but he always managed to make them gods . . . It was not the aim of Dickens to show the effects of circumstances upon character; it was not even his aim to show the effects of character on time and circumstance . . . It was his aim to show character hung in a kind of happy void, in a world apart from time—yes, and essentially apart from circumstance.²¹

Therefore Chesterton disapproved of the shift in the later Dickens, which Gissing noted, from satirizing individuals to satirizing political and economic systems or institutions.

²⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 18.

²¹ Quoted in *Manchester Guardian*, August 30, 1906 [quoted again and again in reviews, perhaps especially so because it reflected Chesterton's on-going debate with Robert Blatchford on free will and the role of economic conditioning in shaping radical consciousness.]

Chesterton is sympathetic to Dickens' criticism of the "British Constitution" and admires Dickens use of the fog in *Bleak House* as a "symbol of oppression." He praises Dickens for showing in *Hard Times* that "economic systems are not things like the stars, but things like lamp-posts, manifestations of the human heart, and things to be judged by the human heart."²² But Chesterton thought that, when Dickens began to imagine his characters degenerating under the heavy weight of political and economic oppression, he lost his essential connection to the liberalism of European Christendom. Chesterton points out that his attitude to his own characters changes. He grows in sympathy for the poor, but no longer caricatures them. They become more pathetic and less grotesque. And Chesterton worries that "there is something a little modern and a little sad, something out of tune with the main trend of Dickens's moral feeling, about the description of the character of Dorrit as actually and finally weakened by his wasting experiences, as not lifting any cry above the conquered years."²³ As Chesterton would say in a later essay, Dickens later characters "have felt the full weight of the club of the giant called Capitalism," and Dickens lost faith in their power to maneuver some space for the human spirit. When Dickens ceases to caricature the poor, they cease to be alive and formidable.

This change in Dickens, Chesterton says, was brought about by contact with Carlyle's powerful writing. "If Dickens, then, took from Carlyle (as he said he did) his image of the Revolution [for *The Tale of Two Cities*], it does certainly mean that he had

²² G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 172.

²³ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 172.

forgotten something of his own youth and come under the more complex influences of the end of the nineteenth century.” Carlyle’s theory that only great men can master the forces of history, Chesterton says, unfortunately appealed to Dickens’ pride in his own success in overcoming hardship. Carlyle, Chesterton wrote, failed to understand the English or French revolutions, because he focused on the “great men,” Napoleon and Cromwell. His theory that genius occasionally surfaces to ride the force of history blinded him to the fact that that these men were “very like other people,” but were only possessed of a great faith in the religious or philosophic principle of the equality and dignity of the common man.

Chesterton thought that Carlyle misread the French revolution by failing to realize that it was “a great doctrinal movement,” a movement based on rational principle not on unconscious historic forces.²⁴ Carlyle pictured the Revolution as something unique and distinctive in history, “a paradox, a strange idolatry,” a war to achieve some “new and queer” utopia, the eruption of the mysterious forces of history hidden in under the appearances of an “outbreak of hunger or vengeance.” Chesterton argues that Dickens, led on by Carlyle, began to also mistake the spirit of the French Revolution for a spirit of blind fury—a wonderful, powerful, unconscious reaction against corrupt tradition. The influence of Carlyle is strongest in *A Tale of Two Cities*, which Chesterton names the least Dickensian of all Dickens’s novels. “There is something quite essentially inconsistent,” Chesterton insisted, “between Carlyle’s disturbed and half-sceptical

²⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Thomas Carlyle*, 1902 Hodder and Stoughton “Bookman Booklet,” with J. E. Hodder Williams

transcendentalism and the original school and spirit to which Dickens belonged, the lucid and laughing decisiveness of the old convinced and contented Radicalism.”²⁵

Dickens’ original understanding of the spirit French Revolution, Chesterton said, came naturally to him as a poor, uneducated Englishman. Dickens, like all good English radicals considered the Revolution as an expression of principle, a “bloody battle for common sense,” a “war for intellectual principles, even for intellectual platitudes,” until Carlyle explained it, in passionate and glowing prose, as the irrational movement of a mob.²⁶ “The people,” with all their foibles, dishonesties, and weaknesses, were rational historical agents in Dickens’ view, until Carlyle revealed “the people” as an expression of the force of history. Growing up in the midst of the common people and their popular traditions, Chesterton wrote, Dickens was steeped in “healthy European philosophy” and “European religion” and recognized in the French Revolution the expression of “a clear and a happy philosophy” whose “main idea was the idea of equality.”

There was a great deal of the actual and unbroken tradition of the Revolution itself in his early radical indictments; in his denunciations of the Fleet Prison there was a great deal of the capture of the Bastille. There was above all a certain reasonable impatience which was the essence of the old Republican, and which is quite unknown to the Revolutionist in modern Europe. The old Radical did not feel exactly that he was ‘in revolt;’ he felt if anything that a number of idiotic institutions had revolted against reason and against him.²⁷

The early Dickens revealed his sympathy for the revolution even in his manner and appearance. “He did tend to pose somewhat in the French manner, of some leaders like

²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 173.

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 173.

²⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 174.

Mirabeau and Gambetta . . . He did not desire success so much as fame, the old human glory, the applause and wonder of the people. Such he was as he walked down the street in his Frenchified clothes, probably with a slight swagger.”²⁸ The early Dickens was “full of the triumphant Radicalism which was then the rising tide of the world.” “Dickens,” Chesterton says, “had the revolutionary idea, though an English form of it, by clear and conscious inheritance; Carlyle had to rediscover the Revolution by a violence of genius and vision.”²⁹

The early Dickens also assumed, Chesterton argues, that the French Revolution was one more in a series of revolutions in a continuous European tradition of radicalism, one more dawn of the “developing idea of liberalism.” He did not consider the French Revolution in the Carlylean sense as a unique historical event, a sudden reaction against the accumulated civilization of Europe. “Mr. Gissing’s error, then about the early Dickens period we may put thus: in calling it hard and cruel he omits the wind of hope and humanity that was blowing through it.” The “atmosphere of the Revolution,” Chesterton says, was that of “a shouting, fighting, drinking philanthropy—a noble thing,”

²⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 159-160. *Tribune*, August 30, 1906. The *Tribune* reviewer objected to Chesterton’s argument that the gaudy dress of Dickensian England was evidence of sympathy for the Revolution. The reviewer’s understanding of Chesterton’s point was somewhat confused, but he evidently preferred to align Britain with America, than with France:

Not even to the French Revolution do we owe it that we all go now in black, instead of the bold and various hues that distinguished the costume of Dickens’s England. It was from the United States, where the last traces of Puritanism lingered in the severity of the people’s garb and the strenuousness of the people’s pursuit of wealth—it was from our keen, competitive kinsmen on the other side of the Atlantic that we learned the propriety of “subfuse” garments in the commercial age.

²⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 174.

in line with a “rough and even rowdy humanitarianism” that had been more or less present throughout the length of European history.³⁰ “If he had not his place with Fielding and Thackeray, he would still have his place with Wat Tyler and Wilkes; for the man led a mob.”

Nothing, however, Chesterton insists, could completely dislodge the “old hilarious and sentimental view of human nature” Dickens inherited from the tradition of Christendom. Dickens’s later despairing view was always tempered by “Great Characters” and “Essential Optimism,” as Chesterton’s final chapter titles proclaim. “His old political simplicity ha[d] been slightly disturbed by Carlyle,” but, Chesterton happily says, his books remain “a carnival of liberty, and there is more of the real spirit of the French Revolution in *Nicholas Nickleby* than in *The Tale of Two Cities*.”³¹ Dickens revealed his true democratic sensibility in his enjoyment of grotesque caricature even in his darkest novels and his care over an incredible multiplicity and variety of minor characters. And thus Chesterton himself ends the narrative of Dickens’s life on what he would have considered a Dickensian note: Dickens’s essential character as an artist of the grotesque democracy is hung in mythological space and survives all vicissitudes.

Chesterton’s contemporary reviewers sensed an increase in political radicalism in his work on Dickens. They recognized that Chesterton, like Gissing, represented a “new

³⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 14.

³¹ The later Dickens was always tempered by “Great Characters” and “Essential Optimism,” as Chesterton’s final chapter titles proclaim. 18.

generation of literary critics” who were taking Dickens’ art seriously and trying to historicize and politicize their readers understanding of Dickens’ literary output.³² *The Young Man* magazine, introducing Chesterton’s *Charles Dickens* as book of the month for October 1906, warned that “the Tory will not like it.” But it was not only Tories who did not approve of Chesterton’s Dickens. Liberals, on the verge of winning the 1906 election in an alliance with Labour, also objected to Chesterton’s brand of radicalism.³³ Reviewers in general resisted Chesterton’s idea of the presence of the spirit of the French Revolution in Dickens’s English liberalism.

Conservative papers objected to Chesterton using Dickens’ reputation as a great English author as political propaganda for the Liberal Party during the 1906 election year. The *Tribune* reviewer insisted that “Dickens comes nearest of any of our great writers to the consummation of being a national classic—that is, the possession impartially of every section of society.” Dickens was already a national possession and should therefore be out of bounds for political reinterpretation. “All sensible people are of the same opinion about Dickens,” wrote the *Times*. “No one can pretend that he was very subtle, but no one can deny that he was unique, very funny, very real in his unreal way, very English and very great . . . There is very little left therefore for Mr. Chesterton to say.”³⁴ “It is a pity,” another reviewer wrote, “that Mr. Chesterton in praising (sometimes foolishly) what all

³² Stuart J. Reid, *Standard*, August 31, 1906.

³³ Although some contemporary reviewers felt otherwise: *Sphere*, September 22, 1906 notes the division of reviewers along party lines, and mentions particularly the *Daily Mail* attack as “a masterpiece of unfairness”; *Christian Endeavor Times*, September 13, 1906 notes the *Academy*’s unfair attack (but hopes GK will take some criticism to heart).

³⁴ *Times*, August 31, 1906.

men praise, should pose as the upholder of a lost cause.”³⁵ “The people who sneer at Dickens,” wrote the reviewer for the *Daily Mail*, “no longer exist,” but that should not be taken to imply that the nation had accepted his radicalism as their own.³⁶

To deny Dickens’ status as a classic expression of an English radical tradition, reviewers portrayed Dickens as an apolitical writer of comic fantasy, unique for his “entire independence of previous thought and history and culture.”³⁷ “It is a pity,” one reviewer said, that Chesterton could not have “rested content with appreciation” without feeling the “compulsion to ‘place’ Dickens in his relation to the thought of his century.”

Mr. Chesterton has not the historic equipment for such a task. As he looks back to the early years of the last century, only one landmark looms upon his horizon—the French Revolution—and he finds the explanation of every movement and idea in the Revolution as Malebranche saw everything in the Deity. He forgets that reaction was the chief effect of the Revolution on English society; he forgets that with our invincible insularity, Corn Laws and Reform Bills were far more impressive objects to us than the fall of the Bastille or the French people’s declaration of fraternity. He forgets that even if Dickens was a child of the Revolution, it was the revolution of 1830, which set up the “Citizen King,” for Dickens was bourgeois to the core.³⁸

³⁵ *Observer*, September 2, 1906.

³⁶ *Daily Mail*, September 6, 1906

³⁷ See also *Black and White*, September 15, 1906. “Chesterton’s politics are all wrong, but he reads Dickens right in calling him a great inventor of grotesque characters. Dickens was no realist; he was a mere undignified caricaturist.”

³⁸ *Tribune*, August 30, 1906. The reviewer goes on to insist that what reforming spirit there was in England during the nineteenth century came from the United States “where the last traces of the Puritanism lingered.” *Academy*, September 8, 1906 complains that “A sort of keynote to the book is that Dickens and his contemporaries, especially Carlyle, were children of the French Revolution.”

These reviewers took a dark view of Chesterton's aim in writing. "The grim purpose of this book is to exalt democracy and to preach the doctrine of Radical politics."³⁹ One reviewer referred to Chesterton repeatedly as "a politician," and questioned a politician's right and ability to comment on literary matters.⁴⁰ Chesterton was more of a "street-preacher" than a literary critic.⁴¹ "Mr. Chesterton makes Dickens an excuse for an expression of the class hatred which is growing up in England," using his critical study as an occasion for arousing an "inverted snobbishness" of the poor against the rich, that could not be found in the English public "outside of the columns of *The London Journal*" (a small socialist paper). Against Chesterton's political appreciation of Dickens, conservative reviewers insisted simply, "It is not for his Liberalism that we remember [Dickens]."⁴²

Liberal and Tory reviewers objected to Chesterton's agreement with Gissing as to Dickens's "unfathomable contempt" for Parliament and the British Constitution.⁴³ Conservatives and Liberals both saw the Reform Bill as a model of constitutional reform

³⁹ *Daily Mail*, September 9, 1906. This review elicited a Letter to Editor in *Daily Mail* from E. Nesbit insisting that "Dickens was an innovator, was a Socialist, and that in their snobbishness against the rich Dickens and Chesterton are in the good company of the old Testament prophets, the apostles, evangelists and Our Lord." [See also *New Age* 1908: Edwin Pugh, "Dickens as Socialist."]

⁴⁰ *Saturday Review*, September 22, 1906

⁴¹ 15/9/6 *Athenaeum*, September 15, 1906; *Glasgow News*, August 30, 1906 commenting on a later biography of Browning says that the price should be lowered from seven and sixpence to compete with Chesterton's Browning, which was available even to the working class at two shillings.

⁴² *Daily Mail*, September 6, 1906.

⁴³ G. K. Chesterton, *Charles Dickens* (1906), 53.

and quintessentially British as a progressive compromise. Conservative reviewers argue that the English response to the French Revolution was reaction, expressed in the Reform Bill. Liberal reviewers argue that the spirit of the French Revolution blossomed in England in the Reform Bill. Liberal reviewers were not eager to explain that Chesterton, a journalist for the Liberal *Daily News*, ascribed to England a popular revolutionary tradition embodied in Dickens' novels that was more trenchant than the Victorian Compromise expressed in the Reform Bill. One Liberal reviewer, acknowledging that Chesterton's "passage on the French Revolution and the hopes from it that still survived among our democracy in the early years of the nineteenth century is admirable," suggests Dickens saw these hopes fulfilled by mid-century.⁴⁴ The *Daily News* reviewer also admired Chesterton portrayal of "Dickens as the expression of democracy and the new hope born out of the French Revolution," but he insists that Dickens could criticize his own government because he lived under the security of a democracy already established. "It may be that [Chesterton] places too much emphasis on the French Revolution as a factor in Dickens's day."⁴⁵ "I venture to think that Mr. Chesterton does not do full justice to the fact that Dickens commenced his career about the time of the great Reform Bill, a time when he found the nation particularly responsive to his ideas . . . Dickens . . . gave that mood language and stimulus."⁴⁶ In general, the Liberal reviewers tended to smooth over Chesterton's view of Dickens as a critic of the British constitution and

⁴⁴ *Spectator*, September 16, 1906.

⁴⁵ *Public Opinion*, September 7, 1906.

⁴⁶ W. Robertson Nicol, "Claudius Clear," 6/9/06 *British Weekly*, September 6, 1906.

Parliamentary government. They muted Chesterton's radical message and reincorporated Dickens' voice into their own progressive liberalism:

Nothing was more remarkable in Charles Dickens than his sympathy. It was this that led him to send his imagination on errands of charity, and his feeling for the poor, the neglected and more especially for childhood in its pathetic and helpless aspects, was pushed at times so far as to imperil his art. Like other warm-hearted, impulsive men of sentiment, he was a wretched political economist, but he at least made the atmosphere in which other people, more practical people and assuredly less gifted, could fashion with success their ordered schemes of reform. Mr. Chesterton is right in insisting on the fact that Dickens possessed common-sense and uncommon sensibility.⁴⁷

Reviewers presented Chesterton's Dickens to their readers with the sting left out.

The reviewers for the Liberal press hoped that Chesterton would become "less of an *enfant terrible* and more of a responsible being," which seems to be a plea that he not criticize his own party for betraying its radical past.⁴⁸ This is evidence here of the gap opening up between Chesterton's idea of English liberal radicalism and the progressive liberalism of the Liberal Party and the *Daily News*. One reviewer said that this book revealed that Chesterton was out of place as a writer for the Liberal organ in the press, being a beer-drinking republican but affiliated with the teetotaler party, a patriot in a party of cosmopolitans, and apparently an orthodox Christian working for dissenters.⁴⁹

Nevertheless, reviewers were open to Chesterton's primary appreciation of Dickens as a caricaturist. "The great characters are static, they never change;

⁴⁷ Stuart J. Reid, *Standard*, August 31, 1906.

⁴⁸ *Manchester Guardian*, October 10, 1906.

⁴⁹ *Outlook*, September 8, 1906

circumstances change, but they remain as they were when introduced to us.”⁵⁰ “There is nothing wiser or more far-reaching than his plea for Dickens’s characters as great primary types, grotesques (if you will) of an almost mythological art, who by their very remoteness from the common individual claim a sort of kinship with the gods.”⁵¹ And one cannot fully appreciate the influence of Chesterton’s Dickens criticism without realizing he repeated his argument for an Englishness based on Dickensian Christmases and Dickensian grotesques—and was reported and quoted as having repeated—in innumerable prefaces, articles, speeches, and reviews, until his initials, “GKC,” became synonymous with this version of Englishness. Chesterton’s Dickensian English Christmases even became a kind of commodity that could be resold and recycled independent of his name, but not, Chesterton would likely insist, independent of Dickens’s faith in England’s “laughing and quite desperate democracy.”⁵²

⁵⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, September 7, 1906.

⁵¹ Arthur Waugh, *Daily Chronicle*, September 6, 1906. J. W. T. Ley in *The Dickensian* (October 1906) agreed with Waugh that the striking truth of Chesterton’s book is the passage about the static, god-like characters.

⁵² G. K. Chesterton, *Tremendous Trifles* (1909), article republished from *Illustrated London News*.

Part II. Introduction: G. K. Chesterton and the Whig history of English Religion

In his early literary criticism Chesterton began by defending but ended up revising the conventional Whig interpretation of English literature. His literary version of England's national identity, in which European influences on Browning and Dickens played such a part, emphasized English liberalism's roots in a longer continuity of European liberalism. His evolving thoughts on English culture's participation in the cultural unity of Europe led him, as has been seen in the discussion of Browning, to question contemporary definitions of English Christianity. Chesterton's rethinking of England's religious identity and history came to the fore again in what was known as the "Blatchford Controversy," out of which developed two of Chesterton's best known works, *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*, as well as his lifelong debating partnership with G. Bernard Shaw. Part II will give a fuller and more contextualized account than has been given elsewhere of the "Blatchford Controversy," and will suggest that through the controversy Chesterton revised the Victorian Whig history in which the development of Protestantism parallels the story of English liberalism. Chesterton worked on constructing a narrative of a longer continuity of "Catholic Christianity" in English culture.

Chapter 3: The Blatchford Controversy

After *Robert Browning*, Chesterton was taken as one of the “Boanerges of literary criticism” passing “*obiter dicta* on the universe at large.”¹ The Liberal literary

¹ *Daily Advertiser*, September 12, 1903; *New York Evening Post*, USA, August 12, 1903 (refers to him as “Mr. Chesterton, in his now familiar column in the London *Daily News* . . .”). *Sketch*, June 15, 1904: “Mr. G. K. Chesterton is becoming very popular in America. All his recent books have been well received, and for everything he writes there is a growing audience.” *Louisville Journal*, KY, June 14, 1904 (Notes his increasing literary work and says that he “is becoming a ‘syndicate’”). *Birmingham Owl*, July 1, 1904.

A second edition of *The Defendant*, a collection of his Boer War essays from the *Speaker* published in 1901, was printed just before *Robert Browning* appeared. See “Book of the Week,” *Times Weekly Literary Supplement*, January 24, 1903 (a very long article that quotes Masterman’s Bookman article on Chesterton’s reputation in full); *Catholic Book Notes*, January 1903, “[His defense of patriotism] runs counter to the meaning often attached to that much abused word.” “The Defendant,” *Plymouth western Mercury*, January 19, 1903; *J. P.’s Weekly*, February 13, 1903; *Irish Times*, March 23, 1903.

C. F. G. Masterman also wrote the first biographical sketch of Chesterton this same year. “G. K. Chesterton: An Appreciation,” *Bookman*, January 1903. “A short time afterwards the world was astonished to learn that Mr. John Morley had entrusted to this unknown poet the biography of Robert Browning in the series which is compiled by men of three-score years, knighted, and with unchallenged literary supremacy. Mr. G. K. Chesterton has thus sprung suddenly to literary fame. Now everyone reads him: in the *Bookman*, the *Speaker*, the *Daily News*, the *World*; in the journalistic leavings that are eagerly collected together and issued cold by enterprising publishers.” “The redemption of Patriotism from its modern blasphemers is the work to which he is particularly devoted. . . . President of Patriot’s club. . . . for this he lectures in strange surroundings.” Masterman’s article was reprinted in whole or part in *Glasgow Herald*, January 17, 1903; *Glasgow Evening News*, January 13, 1903; *Academy and Literature*, January 10, 1903; *St. James’s Gazette*, January 10, 1903; *Pall Mall Gazette*, January 15, 1903; *Church Family Newspaper*, January 16, 1903; *Manchester Dispatch*, January 16, 1903; *Globe*, January 10, 1903; *Birmingham Gazette*, January 13, 1903; *Dispatch*, St. Paul, Minn, USA, June 20, 1903; *Bakers Record*, January 23, 1903.

Announcements and articles in expectation of Chesterton’s Bookman Booklets on Carlyle, Thackeray, Tolstoy, and Dickens appeared monthly throughout the year.

Chesterton’s lectures for 1903 included one on “Nationalism in Literature,” a presidential address to the Wolverhampton Literary Club, and on “Parochial Poetry and Patriotism” as part of the Westminster lecture series. Reported in 1/7/03 *Midland Weekly News*; 14/3/03 *Midland County Express*; *Daily News*, January 14, 1903; 14/1/03 *Wolverhampton Express and Star*: “Mr. Chesterton strives to show that nations need

establishment recruited Chesterton into their ranks, and his work attracted a solidly middle-class, respectable, dissenting Christian readership. His great patron and friend remained Rev. W. Robertson Nicoll, who edited the monthly literary journal the *Bookman* and the weekly Nonconformist Sunday paper, the *British Weekly*, but after the war, besides literary reviews for these and two columns a week for the *Daily News*, he contributed regularly to the *Speaker*, the *Nation*, *Reynold's Paper*, the *Manchester Sunday Chronicle*, the *Bookman*, *Pilot*, and *Echo*, and published occasionally in many other journals.² He wrote to his fiancée, Frances, "I know the clockwork of these papers and among one set of them I might almost say I am becoming the fashion."³ His immense publication success—the proliferation of regular columns, reprints of his articles, reviews of his book, interviews, references, and quotations—was sustained by a network of Nonconformist Liberal papers and publishers largely underwritten by the Cadburys and Rowntrees.⁴ One reviewer worried that, "with half a dozen publishers competing for his

literature and that the more extended our acquaintance is with the writings and artistic productions of other lands, the more thorough and less erroneous will be our knowledge of the people who are so far removed from us as to be regarded as 'foreigners.' In short, we need to break through our thick-set insularity, and by so doing, and browsing thoughtfully over the literatures of the world, help forward a time when international relationships will put those that now pass muster to utter shame." And *Morning Leader*, April 22, 1903; *Academy and Literature*, April 25, 1903; *Morning Advertiser*, April 7, 1903; *Daily News*, April 20, 1903; "Parocial Poetry," *Daily News*, May 2, 1903.

² *Pall Mall Gazette*, September 3, 1903, notes Miss. Jane T. Stoddart's biography of Dr. Robertson Nicoll, "who as editor of the *British Weekly* and the *Bookman* has helped many modern reputations—such names as J. M. Barrie, W. B. Yeats, and G. K. Chesterton occur readily to one."

³ Maisie Ward, *G. K. Chesterton* (1943), 128-131.

⁴ After Robert Browning articles began appearing accessing Chesterton's reputation because his "rise to fame has been so meteoric," *Literary World*, December 11, 1903 (notes that *Who's Who* now includes Chesterton). Also "A Genial Critic," *Christian Reader*, September 1903; *St. James's Gazette*, September 7, 1903; *Sketch*, September 23,

work and the daily, weekly and monthly press ready to print anything he may write,” Chesterton not have time to develop his abilities as prophet of the English nation by a “sojourn in the desert.”⁵

Despite all this Liberal patronage, however, and despite an invitation to take the newly created Chair of English Literature at the University of Birmingham, Chesterton resisted becoming a mouthpiece for what he called Liberalism of the “top-hat and Union Jack” variety. Keeping close to his early Little England radicalism, he grew especially suspicious the New Liberals and their alliance with the Fabian socialists. He rejected their claim to represent a truly radical agenda. “[Unthinking socialists] might have a vague vision of red flags and red ties in an everlasting riot above the fall of top-hats and Union Jacks,” but, Chesterton wrote in 1919, he had always argued that “Socialism established meant Socialism official.”⁶ Chesterton was within a very English tradition of radicalism in insisting on an “oppositional patriotism” that refused to accept the state as

1903; *M.A.P.*, August 15, 1903 ; “Oracles or Jargon?” Letter to the editor, *Daily News; Birmingham Owl*, September 3, 1903; *Sunday School Chronicle*, December 31, 1903: “If there is a more popular journalist just now than Mr. G. K. Chesterton, I should like to know him . . . One meets his name in all sorts of journals and over all sorts of subjects.” *Weeks Survey*, January 9, 1904; “Literary London,” *Glasgow Evening News*, August 11, 1903; “Literary London”; *Christian World*, October 7, 1903.

For an account of the revival of the Nonconformist press at the beginning of the twentieth century see Stephen Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975).

⁵ Randall Blackshaw, “Who is Mr. Chesterton?” *The Critic*, September 1903. Bradshaw wrote in response to an American literary critic who had read Chesterton’s *Defendant*. “When he published *The Defendant* in October, 1901, he was virtually unknown, so that his reputation, such as it is, is a thing of little more than one year’s growth.”

⁶ Cecil Chesterton, *A History of the United States*, introduction by G.K. Chesterton (Chatto and Windus, 1919). Cecil had just died in a military hospital in France, and Chesterton’s introduction reflected on his brother’s lifework.

interchangeable with the nation.⁷ He became the champion of this radical liberal tradition against the encroachments of socialism in a religious controversy that arose from a confluence of trends in the secularist and socialist movements. He became involved in a debate over whether Christianity was properly the ally of liberalism or socialism. Through the debate, Chesterton made explicit his understanding of the historic connection between liberalism and Christianity, which had he suggested in a variety of ways in his literary criticism.

At the turn of the century the socialist movement was developing into a politically viable rival to the Liberal opposition, and as it did so socialists attempted to lay claim to the English radical tradition. Socialist plans for collectivization of the means of production and organization of labor inevitably involved some expansion of the powers of the state, which, of course, clashed with the radical tradition of anti-statism and oppositional patriotism. Moreover, from the 1890s on, British socialists, especially the intellectual leadership in the Fabian Society, accepted the state as it was, the workings of parliamentary democracy and the democratically elected government, as a legitimate representative of the nation. Fabian gradualism and enthusiasm for the efficient, imperial state opened the door for accusations that socialism remained foreign to the true English radical tradition.⁸ Robert Blatchford, the leading socialist journalist at the turn of the

⁷ Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack: Englishness, Patriotism and the British Left, 1881-1924*. (Royal Historical Society: Boydell Press, 1998).

⁸ Paul Ward, *Red Flag and Union Jack*. (1998). Ward suggests that early English socialists had a certain amount of success in replacing radical patriotism's anti-statism with anti-urbanization sentiment. Idealizing medieval England's pastoral labour and village craftwork, demonizing capitalism for the ugliness of urban sprawl focused

century, attempted to associate socialism with another aspect of the Victorian radical tradition: the demand for liberty of conscience and disestablishment of religion.⁹ If the socialist movement could not keep faith with the liberal ideal of a non-interventionist state in the economic and social realm, some socialists insisted even more strongly on being the legitimate heirs to the radical English nation's liberalism in the intellectual and religious sphere.

Blatchford was not the first to consider laying claim to the mantle of the English radical tradition by allying socialism with secularism, but his prominence in the socialist movement made him a perfect mouthpiece for the movement in that direction. Associating socialism with secularism was counter-intuitive in the British context where the socialist movement was led by Christians and secularists tended to be liberal radicals because the power of the British state seemed the bulwark of religion and religious education in the nation. But at the turn of the century, as established church and dissenting chapel merged towards denominational status in an increasingly secularized public sphere, these positions were in disarray. In 1895-6 George Holyoake founded the Freethought Federation to rival Charles Bradlaugh and G. W. Foote's liberal National Secularist Society and supported two papers, *Jerusalem Star* and *Secular Work*, to rival

attention away from the anti-statist liberalism of the English radical tradition and onto the positive aspects of state-organized land redistribution. English socialists helped to make the country life itself, rather than political independence, the locus of authentic Englishness.

⁹ Blatchford founded the *Clarion* in Manchester in 1891, which began with an initial circulation of 40,000. His *Clarion* pamphlets, his network of *Clarion* "Cinderella clubs" for poor children, "Clarionette" social and cycling clubs, which served as a means of promoting the paper, soon gave him a name as the father of socialist journalism.

the N.S.S.'s *Freethinker*.¹⁰ The Freethought Federation promoted an alliance between secularists and socialists.¹¹ Also in 1895, Stanton Coit founded the British Ethical Union, which similarly brought together secularism and socialism.¹² Joseph McCabe founded the Rationalist Press Association in 1900 with George Holyoake as chairman to further promote a secularist-socialist alliance.¹³ Still, one could hardly say that these groups attracted widespread notice. One of the first books the R.P.A. published in 1900 was Joseph McCabe's translation of Ernst Haeckel's *The Riddle of the Universe*. The first edition of 2,000 copies did not sell, until, that is, in January 1903, Robert Blatchford, reviewed the book enthusiastically in his paper, the *Clarion*. The review kicked off a

¹⁰ Charles Bradlaugh, the founder, president, and one-man organizer of the National Secularist Society, and his successor G. W. Foote, maintained that the freethought movement was tied to individualistic liberalism. They found Christianity and socialism equally abhorrent. Under their leadership the N.S.S. steadily opposed efforts to unite secularist propaganda with socialist projects and policies. To support the idea that socialism arose naturally from Christian belief, Foote could point to the fact that, despite the professed Marxism of the Socialist Democratic Federation and agnostic leadership of the Fabian Society, the Independent Labour Party and the labour movement at large drew much of its support and leadership from evangelical Christians like Arthur Henderson and Keir Hardie. Certainly the heroes of the socialist movement were Christian Socialists like F. D. Maurice and William Morris.

¹¹ At the turn of the century the N.S.S. remained the stronger organization with branches throughout the country, but its active membership was a mere thousand and the number of subscribers to the *Freethinker* was dropping quickly from the 10,000 reached in 1882 during Foote's well-publicized trial for blasphemy.

¹² The Ethical Union eventually brought together twenty-six ethical societies from around London and the provinces and by 1906 the members frequently expressed the hope that secularist-socialist ethics would become the new national religion.

¹³ Joseph McCabe (1867-1955) was a Franciscan who left the priesthood in 1896 and published two controversial books in 1897, *Twelve Years in a Monastery* and *Modern Rationalism*. The R.P.A. was a new propaganda venture for the secularist movement, run on the lines of a subscription book club, with links to various respectable publishing houses. Like the Fabian Tracts in the socialist press, it aimed at a slightly more educated audience than previous secularist papers.

long-running public controversy and 100,000 copies of the R.P.A.'s *Riddle of the Universe* were sold in the next two years.

In the review Blatchford argued for the impossibility of reconciling socialism and Christianity; his aggressively anti-religious position struck his readers as a departure from the *Clarion's* previous editorial tone, but Blatchford's attitude to religion had never been very clear in his earlier work. George Haw, a friend of Blatchford's on the *Daily News* staff, wrote,

[Secularism was] the attitude of the founders of Social Democracy on the Continent. The same anti-Christian tendency has been shown by men who have tried to build up a Social Democratic Party in England . . . Yet we know that this kind of Socialism made no headway in England. Social Democracy was stagnant while a body of Christian Socialists grew up among us. These people had been influenced by Kingsley and Maurice in the Church of England, and by the great missions, with their large social aims, founded in recent years by the Nonconformist Churches.

Socialism in this country was without a prophet among the people until Mr. Blatchford appeared. His *Merrie England* burst upon them as a revelation . . . Here was a Socialism that was not irreligious, whatever else it may be. There was a distinctly Christian note in that and many of Mr. Blatchford's subsequent books. For years the Socialism that has been identified with the *Clarion* and its editor has steadily grown in this country.¹⁴

¹⁴ *The Religious Doubts of Democracy*, edited by George Haw (London, 1904). As Haw said in the introduction, "every week for six months" Blatchford had allowed "three of his best columns in the *Clarion*" to be dedicated to a defense of "the essential truths of Christianity." In this collection Chesterton's articles "Christianity and Rationalism" (July 22), "We are all Agnostics Until—" (July 29), and "Mr. Blatchford's Religion" (August 5), were divided into four and the last three retitled, "Why I believe in Christianity," "Miracles and Modern Civilization," and "The Eternal Heroism of the Slums." These are the only articles collected under the title "The Blatchford Controversy" in *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. I., ed. by David Dooley (San Francisco, 1986). Blatchford's articles objecting to Christianity were also republished as *God and My Neighbor* and *Not Guilty* (1906).

Haw thought it was clear that Blatchford was the leader of *English* socialism, which had always meant *Christian* socialism. In *Merrie England* Blatchford had drawn his socialism from English sources, Morris, Ruskin, Maurice, and avoided even Marx and Engles as alien to the English socialist tradition. He avoided any clash with English radicalism by speaking minimally about any “national scheme of co-operation managed by the State” or “scientific scheme of national Government,” and waxed eloquent on the innate sources of socialism in England. He suggested that the English character was such that it would make possible state socialism without the specter of an invasive rule by state officials and his followers referred to this blend of socialism and idealism as “prophetic” and “religious.”

Yet, Blatchford equivocated as to whether the source of the Englishman’s “innate goodness” was due to the nation’s Christian tradition or racial inheritance. In *Merrie England* Blatchford wrote that the “Caucasian race” was closer to the altruism necessary for socialism than “the Mongolian, the Turanian, and other inferior races”: “I take the scientists view that man is an undeveloped creature. That he is a being risen from lower forms of life, that he is slowly working out his development—in an *upward* direction—and that he is yet a long way from the summit.”¹⁵ He argued that “men are made what they are by two forces: Heredity and Environment. That is to say, by ‘breed’ and the conditions of life.”¹⁶ Blatchford called for the racial regeneration of the British

¹⁵ Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England*, 32-33.

¹⁶ Robert Blatchford, *Merrie England*, 32-33.

and he became increasingly insistent during the peace movement on the need for state intervention, in health, social welfare, and especially education and military training.¹⁷

His readers, in turn, attributed his ability to “manufacture Socialists more quickly than anyone else” to the “amazing story of good Saxon.” One admirer even went so far as to count up the number of “Latinisms” per word in Blatchford’s writing.¹⁸ Yet Blatchford’s “plain English” resonated with the tones of the St. James Bible, and many readers believed it was *this* that was “Mr. Blatchford’s greatest qualification for the post of missionary-in-chief.”¹⁹ Blatchford, in the tradition of the Victorian Christian socialists, drew on the language of the Old Testament prophets to denounce capitalism and the language of the Gospels to draw attention to the duty to care for the poor. In *Merrie England* he recommended Job, Ecclesiastes, and Isaiah as “homework” for his readers. In 1893 the *Labour Prophet* ran an article asking “How Nunquam Does it” (“Nunquam” was Blatchford’s pseudonym):

You don’t think he jumped right into his terse English style do you? You should study style. Take these books — Job — Isaiah — Ecclesiastes — Epistles of Paul — Litany of the Church Prayer Book — Hamlet — King Lear — Macbeth — As You Like It — Much Ado About Nothing — Merchant of Venice — and read them over and over again. Try to master the language and methods of the prose of those times.²⁰

¹⁷ Blatchford’s review of Haeckel’s book was a step in his movement from a radical ‘English’ socialism of the Morrisite “New from Nowhere” kind to the ‘British’ social imperialism that he would come to espouse during the First World War. Bernard Semmel, *Imperialism and Social Reform: English Social-Imperial Thought, 1895-1914*. (Harvard UP, 1960), 222-233.

¹⁸ R. B. Suthers, “Reminiscences,” *Clarion Coming-of-Age Supplement*, December 6, 1912.

¹⁹ Quoted in A. Neil Lyons, *Robert Blatchford: A Sketch of a Personality: An Estimate of Some Achievements* (London: Clarion Press, 1910).

²⁰ “How Nunquam Does it” *The Labour Prophet*, June 1893.

Blatchford began and ended his later book *Britain for the British* with quotations from the Litany of the Church of England, saying, “If we would realize the prayer they utter, we must turn to Socialism.”²¹

But in the review of Haeckel Blatchford linked his racial and evolutionary thinking to an explicit rejection of Christianity as the tool of an oppressive establishment that encouraged indifference to the conditions of poverty. “We Socialists are told, as the scientists are told, that our heresies are false and can be easily confuted. We want to fight the greatest champions of the opposite side. To fight them fair before the world. The conditions of the combat being that the economic truths finally established shall be adopted universally and shall be taught in schools.”²² Haeckel’s evolutionary history of society and the human spirit provided the theoretical underpinnings of socialist policy and his German idealist “monism” could provide the socialists with a philosophical replacement for Anglican dominance of religious education. He admired “this book of Haeckel’s,” he said, because it “assails the very foundations of orthodox religion.” Haeckel proved “that science had trace man’s steps in evolution from the jelly fish to

²¹ Laurence Thompson, *Robert Blatchford: Portrait of an Englishman* (Victor Gollanz, LTD., London, 1951); Mike and Liz Sones, *An Introduction to Robert Blatchford and the Clarion Newspaper*. Clarion workshop Press, Harrow, 1986; Leslie Jones, *Robert Blatchford and the Clarion*, Hyde Park Pamphlet No. 9, (Leslie S. A. Jones, London, 1986). Clarion Pamphlets No. 1. Socialism: A Reply to the Encyclical of the POPE. By Robert Blatchford, “Nunquam” (Reprinted from the Clarion: London, 1893), British Library, Tracts on Social and Industrial Questions, 1892-1893. *Merrie England*, by Nunquam (London, Clarion Office, 1893). Robert Blatchford, *Britain for the British* (London, Clarion Press, 72 Fleet Street, 1902). Robert Blatchford, *God and My Neighbour* (London, Clarion Press, 1903)

²² Blatchford, *Clarion*, January 23, 1903.

Shakespeare” and in tracing the effects of heredity and environment on man’s psychology and social arrangements made a mockery of the Christian idea of free will and divine retributions and reward. With this review Blatchford initiated a series of articles attacking Christianity as a force of social reaction, dismissed the very idea of Christian Socialism, and demanded truly secular and scientific state education.

Chesterton was drawn into this debate as a spokesman for the Christian position of the *Daily News*. Part of Blatchford’s reason for staking his reputation and his paper’s circulation on an attempt to divide English socialism from English Christianity was to undermine the dominance of the Liberal press network. *Clarion* readers’ were horrified that the editor of the only successful socialist paper, particularly identified with truly British socialism, publicly took sides with the Freethought Federation and the Ethical Union against the mass of the labour movement who continued to see English dissent and socialism as allies. A fellow editor of the *Clarion* later wrote:

When Mr. Blatchford’s first article in condemnation of certain Christian dogmas appeared in the *Clarion*, many readers of the paper became highly agitated. When the second article was printed, this agitation turned to horror. Then came the final blow. Mr. Blatchford caused it to be known that his little “baggage action” was not really a baggage action at all, being, in fact, a full blown, double-breasted campaign, “to be continued” in the paper week by week for an indefinite period. The feeling which now agitated the bosoms of the afflicted was one of blank dismay. Socialists all over England went into mourning, and told each other that Socialism would die—was dead; Nunquam had killed it.

Dissent on Blatchford’s secularism from the *Clarion*’s own staff was led by J. Cartmel Robinson, a Christian socialist pastor who had helped Blatchford organize the *Clarion* Fellowship. But Blatchford was a more acute judge of the journalistic situation than his colleagues at the *Clarion* who feared that his allying socialism with radical secularism

would sink the best-selling socialist journal in England. At the turn of the century, the Liberal press was struggling to maintain its traditional dominance of the press against the new Unionist mass circulation papers, and Labour leaders, who relied to a large extent on Liberal papers for a national forum, were looking for an independent forum. The *Daily News* held a prominent position within the political press and was hoping to be the forum for New Liberalism and Labour. Founded by Charles Dickens as the opposition paper in 1845, it could claim to be one of the most venerable, flourishing, and influential of the Liberal dailies. Its owner, George Cadbury, was sympathetic to New Liberalism or, as he preferred to call it, “ethical Christianity.” He advocated state funding of old age pensions and other welfare policies, and was known for his own efforts to create a utopian community for the workers at the Bourneville factory.²³ The *Daily News* was, in a sense, the paper to beat for socialist journalists at the turn of the century. Blatchford’s challenge to Christian socialism also challenged the position of the *Daily News*, with its

²³ Stephen Koss, *The Rise and Fall of the Political Press in Britain* (London, 1991), 402. Quotes letter from Cadbury to Scott: Cadbury to Scott, 20 and 28 December 1901, Guardian Archives. The *Daily News* could not claim comparable circulation to the great new mass circulation papers such as Harmsworth’s *Daily Mail*, which had been launched at 400,000 copies in 1896 and had already achieved a circulation of over a million copies daily by 1900. Yet, W. T. Stead, assessing the *Daily News*’s position in 1904, placing it in a second tier in a gradation from mass circulation to political influence. The first tier consisted solely of the *Times* and the *Westminster Gazette*, which reached negligible circulations, but which were considered influential party organs read by the political establishment of both parties. The *Daily Telegraph*, the *Daily Mail*, third tier newspapers with a circulation of a million copies per day, struck contemporaries as having traded in the ability to influence their readers for maximum circulation. The *Daily News* and the *Standard* led the second tier, newspapers that managed to capture a wide audience while retaining reputations for editorial standards and political influence, and the *Daily News* further extended its influence by a “friendly alliance” with the *Manchester Guardian* and the provincial press, which was dominated by the Liberals.

combination of dissenting religion, New Liberal opinion and funding from George Cadbury, the “Cocoa capitalist,” as the foremost radical paper in the opposition.²⁴

The debate on the new direction of English socialism, as started by Blatchford, proceeded largely along the lines of a fight between secular and Christian socialists. Blatchford envisioned the controversy in terms of a disagreement with Christian socialists as to his interpretation of the social implications of Christianity. He invited George Haw his earnest young Christian socialist friend on the *Daily News* staff to recruit Christian respondents to write articles for the *Clarion* and later to edit the contributions in book form. These were published as *The Religious Doubts of Democracy* simultaneously with the collection of his own *God and My Neighbour* in 1904. The liberal secularists, who disagreed with Blatchford’s interpretation of the political implications of secularism, complained that they had been left out in the cold. Haw recruited Chesterton to defend the *Daily News*’s Christian socialism, and Chesterton branched off entirely on his own. The problem was that, apparently alone among the Christian respondents, he agreed with Blatchford in his interpretation of the relationship between Christianity and liberalism but

²⁴ Chesterton recognized better than others that Blatchford’s challenge was “good journalism”: “The whole modern world is pining for a genuinely sensational journalism. This has been discovered by that very able and honest journalist, Mr. Blatchford, who started his campaign against Christianity, warned on all sides, I believe, that it would ruin his paper, but who continued from an honourable sense of intellectual responsibility. He discovered, however, that while he had undoubtedly shocked his readers, he had also greatly advanced his paper. It was bought—first, by all the people who agreed with him and wanted to read it; and secondly, by all the people who disagreed with him, and wanted to write him letters.” G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics* (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 1986, 1905), p. 99.

not his devaluation of the combination, and he therefore became Blatchford's primary opponent by defending both.

Chesterton seemed to realize that Blatchford's challenge was an attempt to use secularism to lay claim to the English radical tradition. He offered a pragmatic defense of Christianity as the guardian of the liberal, anti-statist "oppositional patriotism" of the English radical tradition. He insisted that the traditional English belief in free will and liberalism was leading him towards a belief in Christianity. This connection between Christianity and liberalism was precisely the point Blatchford was trying to make and that the Christian socialists were trying to deny. Chesterton was not even sure he was a believing Christian, but only that he found Christianity a historically useful support to English liberalism. Thus, Chesterton disrupted the Blatchford controversy, wrecking havoc on the clear lines of controversy and emerged as a distinctive voice among the Christian respondents and eventually replaced Blatchford as the most controversial and interesting figure in the discussion.

In his articles attacking *Daily News* Christian socialism, Blatchford's rhetorically claims the role of social radical for himself and assigns Christians a certain role as members of the establishment, and most of them stepped easily into the role of respectability outraged and orthodoxy challenged. "Infidel!" is the first word of Blatchford's introduction to the collection of his articles, *God and My Neighbour*. Blatchford savours the fact that this epithet had been thrown at him. He conjures up the image of himself on the street, the ultimate English radical, scoffing at the wealthy as they pass—"a proud and gorgeously upholstered lady," "two successful men of great

presence.” He muses on what it would be like to “dress the part of infidel” that he has taken on. “If you wish,” he says later on, “to lose caste, to miss preferment, to endanger your chances of gaining money and repute, turn Infidel and Socialist.”

The history of civilization is the history of successions of brave “Heretics” and “Infidels” who have denied false dogmas and brought new truths to light. The Heretics have been right and the True Believers wrong. Step by Step the Church has retreated. Are you not aware, friend, Christian, that what was Infidelity is now orthodoxy? Infidel! The name has been born by the noblest of our race.²⁵

If the *Daily News* wanted to retain its position as a genuinely radical paper of the political opposition, it ought to renounce its ties to historic Christianity.

Most of his respondents accepted the assumption that his secularism made him a radical and preached practical, “social Christianity,” combined a T. H. Green-style idealism about the state. The respondents for religion hit a uniformly condescending tone, together conveying the impression of mildly surprise at having to take notice of a working class upstart from their high perch among the educated elite. “But for the accident of its authorship, this book might have very well passed unregarded and uncriticized. Nunquam himself would not claim to rank among discoverers in the realm of theological thinking, nor even among popularizers is he one that speaks with authority upon this particular topic as he does upon problems of economics.” It is only Blatchford’s “style, homely, yet vigorous...which makes him such a powerful and attractive writer” and gains him the “unlimited confidence of a considerable number of readers,” that makes it necessary to reply.²⁶ “It is only his influence with the unread, who are so prone

²⁵ Robert Blatchford, *God and My Neighbour* (London, Clarion Press, 1903)

²⁶ *Anti-Nunquam: An examination of the book God and My Neighbour*, by “J. Warschauer, MA Oxon., D.Phil. Jena” (the academic credentials of the most of the

to confound a glib tongue with a wise head, that makes him worth powder and shot,” wrote another respondent, who also appended to his essay a note to literary critics and reviewers that read:

This little work has been written solely to meet a Godless Socialism, and as those who are captivated therewith belong mainly to the class that prefers to call an “unpleasant odour” “a nasty smell,” all literary ornateness has been sacrificed to attain the end in view... We have aimed at talking to Mr. Blatchford’s followers in language they well understand.²⁷

Despite the tone of easy dismissal, Christian writers responded with an anxious outpouring of lectures and articles on biblical criticism, cultural anthropology, and church history, attempting to bury Blatchford under the weight of modern scholarship. “For two years there came from the pulpits of Great Britain discussion of Blatchford, denunciation of Blatchford, answers to Blatchford.”²⁸ Embedded in most of their responses was a particular conception of faith. Archbishop Wilson set the pace with the argument that religious people had a special mystical knowledge that no amount of materialistic science or philosophical enquiry could either attain or disprove. Some segments of mankind were granted a religious or devotional faculty and others were not: “There was a faculty among men which, in its developed state, was as distinct, as unequally distributed, as mysterious in its origin and in its distribution, as was the faculty for pure mathematics, for music, for

authors is another contrast to “Mr Blatchford” and “Mr. Chesterton,” who write with no scholarly claim to authority).

²⁷ Frank G. Jannaway, *A Godless Socialism* or “Hanging Haman with his own Rope”: A criticism of the uncertain sounds of Robert Blatchford concerning *God and My Neighbour* and *Britain for the British*. (London, New York, Melbourne: Walter Scott Publishing, 1908). British Library, Tracts on Social and Industrial Questions, 1904-1908.

²⁸ *The Religious Doubts of Democracy*, edited by George Haw (London, 1904).

metaphysics, or for research.” An ability for “spiritual discernment,” he implied, was a concomitant of civilization and education. Other respondents echoed this dismissal of Blatchford’s unbelief as mere uneducated “cocksureness, expressed in very vigorous English.”²⁹ The capacity for “spiritual discernment,” they repeated, was “the real parting of the ways” between Blatchford and the Christians. Blatchford’s heresy was his “rejection of the truth that spiritual things must be spiritually discerned” which must stem merely from his own inability to perceive spiritual realities.

He is lacking, that is to say—and one says it, of course, without implying anything in the nature of censure—in the sense which perceives a certain kind of realities, viz., spiritual realities, which to him, accordingly, are not real...

Now it may be at once admitted that there is no possibility of demonstrating the existence of any kind of phenomena to a man who is destitute of the faculty by which the phenomena in question are perceived; but the non-possession of a particular sense does not constitute a right to dogmatise about the phenomena concerning which that sense is the only means of assuring us, and Nunquam’s root-and-branch denial of spiritual realities, on the sole ground that he cannot recognize them, would be ludicrous, were it not really so pathetic. When he talks about spiritual truths as “neither more nor less than mental ideas”; when he speaks of spiritual discernment as “a metaphysical myth”...is it not obvious that to all these deliverances there attaches precisely the kind of authority with which a blind man might discourse about color?

He is indignant at the claim “that only those possessing spiritual discernment can discern spiritual truths”; yet he would probably admit that only those possessing literary discernment can pronounce critical judgements on literature, and only those possessing artistic discernment are fit to speak discriminatingly on pictures.³⁰

The writers in George Haw’s collection expressed their agreement, in some form or another, that religious belief, as pinnacle of the evolution of human life, was not available

²⁹ “Growth of Religious Belief,” Dr. T. C. Fry

³⁰ J. Warschauer, *Anti-Nunquam: An examination of the book God and My Neighbour*.

to all. They rejected the possibility of proving the existence of God—“the best things in Life do not come by reason”³¹—and defended their doctrine by refusing “to be confined within the limits of the region of things proved.”³² The “spiritual faculty,” they agreed, “is the rock on which all Theists take their stand.”³³ This argument for faith was conducive to condescension. “O yes, Mr. Blatchford, we pity you, but it is a pity not distinguishable from contempt.”

Some writers, however, eventually expressed concern that “most of the addresses delivered on the subject [of Blatchford’s atheism] . . . are too academic to meet the most urgent need.” Respondents needed to consider that “their high scholastic level makes them largely miss the working men whom *The Clarion* has hit.” “As the author of *God and My Neighbour* has been for years a socialistic editor and leader, his articles have secured a wide reading, especially among the working classes,” and so representatives of the Christian establishment should moderate their language and arguments for the benefit of their audience.³⁴

Against a backdrop of condescending Christian idealism, Chesterton adopted the position of a Christian radical. Chesterton blithely began by saying that Christianity

³¹ “The Way out for All,” George Haw.

³² “The Faith of the Socialist Working Man,” Tom Adams, *Religious Doubts of Democracy*, edited by George Haw, reprinted in Macmillan’s Popular SixPenny Series (London, 1904).

³³ “Christianity and Science,” Rev. J. Cartmel-Robinson.

³⁴ Rev. Thomas Waugh, *The Clarion or the Bible*, pamphlet.

deserves to be defended because “Christianity is so jolly a thing,” and submitted his defense of religion as a protest to a panel of secularist authorities, “buttoned up to the chin with the great Agnostic Orthodoxy, perhaps the most placid and perfect of all the orthodoxies of men . . . I approach you with the reverence and the courage due to a bench of bishops.” In comparison with the gravity of the rest of the contributions, Chesterton’s appear to be exaggeratedly and deliberately amateur and light-hearted, a spoof on the whole enterprise.³⁵ Chesterton recognized that Blatchford was vying for the role of leader of the opposition and voice of English radicalism. Christians played into Blatchford’s hands when they took up the tone of scholarly ‘defenders of the faith.’ Although at the beginning of the controversy Chesterton’s theology does not radically differ from that of his fellow Christians, his tone is different from the start. He understood the political stakes in the debate better. He had to turn the tables on Blatchford and reclaim the position of challenger to the Establishment.

³⁵It was taken that way by many of the theologians who found him irritating; pastors, preachers, writers of letters to the editor of the religious press, and the young Fabians, socialists, and followers of the ethical movement clearly enjoyed him much more. *Literary Guide*, November 19, 1904: “the religious press, alarmed by Rationalists, call in not only old Christian evidences but the public jester.” See commentary on Chesterton’s “Aggressive Infidelity” lecture at the Liverpool Church Congress (along with seven clergymen and Sir Charles Warren), where he remarked on Blatchford’s articles in *Manchester Guardian*, August 22, 1904; *Rapid Review*, September 1904; *Standard*, September 26, 1904; *Standard*, October 10, 1904; *Daily Mail*, October 5, 1904 (“There is no such thing as an agnostic, except for a newborn babe. Therefore we are fighting not infidelity but a wild sort of new faith.”); *Nottingham Weekly Guardian*, October 1, 1904; *Daily Telegraph*, October 5, 1904; *Manchester Guardian*, October 4, 1910; *Pall Mall Gazette*, October 5, 1904; *Guardian*, October 12, 1904; *Church Times*, October 7, 1904; *St. Andrews*, October 13, 1904; *Daily Graphic*, October 6, 1904; *Freethinker*, October 23, 1904; *Agnostic’s Journal*, December 2, 1904; *Sunday at Home*, December 1904.

So, from the earliest passages of the controversy, Chesterton enacts a kind of generational revolution. Chesterton was significantly younger in years and reputation to Blatchford, and he used this fact to stake out a particular role in the debate. "I am young;" Chesterton said, "a defect of so much importance that Mr. Blatchford returns to it again and again." Chesterton claimed to express "ideas pervading the whole of my generation."

Collect any seven or eight really cultivated young men in London, and the chances are that three or four of them will hold either that history is full of psychic phenomena or that philosophy is based on faith, that men can see ghosts or that men ought to worship the Virgin, that Christianity is the key to history or that Buddhism is the key to metaphysics. I cannot explain my own generation to Mr. Blatchford anymore than he could explain his to the one before. But when we read sentences like, "No, Mr. Chesterton, we shall not cease our war on Christianity. We have got rid of hell, we have got rid of the devil," and so on; "before long we shall have destroyed the belief in miracles," we only murmur sadly, "1860." ...Anyone of my own age (however much opposed to me) will know what I mean when I say that the most recent conditions of the philosophy of mind and matter, of will and environment, of religious traditions and religious revolt, are so complex that there is a certain enviable simplicity in that old rationalism under which all political acts could be traced to "enlightened self-interest," and all European evils to the Roman Catholic Church.³⁶

Chesterton proclaimed a new post-Victorian modernity. The children of the Victorians, Chesterton said, rejected the silence of the Victorian "long, quiet afternoon" of anxious agnosticism and the gradual extension of socialist reform. Victorian agnosticism almost killed off radical protest in England, Chesterton said. The secularist's evolutionary, social

³⁶ G. K. Chesterton, "On Calling a Spade a Spade," July 11, 1903, *Daily News*. See also G. K. Chesterton, Feb 12, 1901 *Daily News*, "A New Study of Swinburne" [review of *Algernon Charles Swinburne: A Study* by Theodore Wratistlaw (Greening and Co. Ltd.); "Pious Poets," *The Freethinker*, June 23, 1901[G.W. Foote's review of GKC's *Daily News* article on Swinburne, "The Conversion of the Poets"]: Chesterton argues that the the modern poets have "got religion", and Foote points out that Swinburne, Meredith, and Thomas Hardy "have not converted from Naturalism."

scientific view of man, in discarding the Christian doctrine of free will, had abandoned the principles of the French Revolution and undermined radical political action:

The philosophic theist and the philosophic atheist stand blushing before each other, with their fingers in their mouths, like a boy and a girl at a children's party. It is time this nonsense stopped . . . During the silence many things have happened. During the silence, at one time, it really did happen that numbers of young men passed over from religion to irreligion. During the silence it has since happened that numberless young men passed back from irreligion to religion. I happened to be among them and I believe that the time has come to talk about it.³⁷

Chesterton claimed the position of youth and modernity, placing Blatchford within the framework of a complacent late-Victorian establishment.³⁸

Chesterton was only twenty-nine when he wrote his first response to Blatchford. He had not been raised a Christian, and although he expressed admiration for his wife's devout Anglo-Catholicism, his own religious ideas were uncertain. This added to the engaging quality of the debate, as readers speculated on the religious and political direction Chesterton would take. By the end, Chesterton had become a household name as an apologist for liberalism and Christian orthodoxy, despite being rather a lone voice in this debate.

In his essay "Why I believe in Christianity" Chesterton rejected the Christian socialists' idea that a special spiritual faculty or ability for "spiritual discernment" set religious believers on a separate, higher plane from the common man. Chesterton insisted

³⁷ G. K. Chesterton, "The Return of the Angels" March 14, 1903, *Daily News*.

³⁸ See Feb 12, 1901 *Daily News*, "A New Study of Swinburne": unsigned review of *Algernon Charles Swinburne: A Study* by Theodore Wratlaw. Greening and Co. Ltd. See also 23/6/01, "Pious Poets," *The Freethinker* [a review of GKC's DN article on Swinburne, "The Conversion of the Poets," by G. W. Foote] Chesterton argues that the the modern poets have "got religion", and the reviewer points out that Swinburne, Meredith, and Thomas Hardy "have not converted from Naturalism."

that religious knowledge was democratic and open to all, based on what he called “mystical common sense.” His efforts to define this “mystical common sense” then became an issue between him and other Christian writers, and their debate over what constituted English Christian orthodoxy eventually submerged the debate with Blatchford over secularism.

Over the next few years, Chesterton became associated in the public mind with Broad Church movement or the “new humanism” of William James. His idea of mankind’s “mystical common sense” drew comparisons with James’s openness to the religious beliefs of ordinary people. James’s studies in psychology and his work as president of the British Psychical Research Society were considered the foundations of a new “science of religions,” which would collect, categorize, and analyze testimony of religious experience. His Gifford Lectures on Natural Religion at the University of Edinburgh in 1901-1902, published in 1902 as *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, were framed as a report on the findings of this new science addressed to an Anglo-American academic community.³⁹ There was a need, he said, to provide a narrative of the evolution of the human spirit and, particularly, to formulate the principles along which the “English-speaking peoples” had progressed spiritually. James hoped to define for himself and his audience—“we English-speaking Protestants”—“the peculiar philosophic temperament, as well as the peculiar political temperament, that goes with our English

³⁹ James called them “Lectures on Natural Religion”; the title was usually Gifford Lectures on Natural Theology.

speech.”⁴⁰ Chesterton had been a reader for the publisher Fisher T. Unwin, who printed some of the findings of James’s “psychical research” project of compiling reams and reams of testimony about religion from the most obscure people. He now appealed to this Jamesian evidence of the “mystical common sense” of the people against Blatchford.

Now when Mr. Blatchford and others say that there is no evidence that faith can work miracles, they are talking pure rubbish. There are mountains of evidence of it, history is loaded with evidence of it, as evidence is understood by people who are trying to write a historical essay or to get a man hanged. That is to say, you could fill libraries with honest human testimony, you could crowd Salisbury Plain with honest ordinary human witnesses, to such things as that God answers prayers or that the dead revisit the earth.⁴¹

On the basis of his pragmatic and democratic defense of religion, Chesterton was welcomed into the Broad Church movement, but there were signs from the beginning that Chesterton understood the history of religion and Christianity’s relation to England’s historic liberalism in a way that was incompatible with the movement.

⁴⁰ William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (New York, 1902).

⁴¹ G. K. Chesterton, “Faith and the Fantastic,” *Daily News*, November 28, 1903. He continued:

I do not say that the people who deny these things are wrong. I only say that they use a ludicrous phrase when they say that there is no evidence for them. Evidence can only mean solemn human testimony in large quantities, and of that the world is chock full... The rationalist puts aside this world-old chorus of witness bearing upon the not unreasonable ground that it is avowedly impartial... But the original question we propounded was exactly this: Do certain experiences follow faith? And how are we to know except from the evidence of the faithful... If the Salvationist hears a call, if a nun has a vision, if a savage receives omens, if a peasant sees fairies, the rationalist school says that this is ignorant evidence. So far from being ignorant evidence, it is expert evidence.

Chesterton's earliest responses to Blatchford evoke the Jamesian pragmatic method of defending religious belief. In *Varieties*, James concluded that the Anglo-American political temperament was liberalism and their "philosophic temperament" was pragmatism, a tendency to place "*spiritual judgement*," "*a proposition of value*, what the Germans call *Werthurtheil*," above "existential judgements."⁴² The pragmatic method—the scientific method of accepting something as a working hypothesis and judging according to how it serves its purpose—was also the most appropriate method for the new science of religions. In his early exchanges, Chesterton also appealed to the "scientific method of hypothesis" as the best method for judging the value of religious belief. "It is quite obvious that this is the method on which we do base all our real beliefs."

[T]he principle that the best way to see if a coat fits a man is not to measure the both of them, but to try it on. It is the replacing of the very slow, logical method of accumulating, point by point, an absolute proof, by a rapid, experimental and imaginative method which gives us, long before we can get absolute proof, a very good working belief.⁴³

Chesterton argues that this method opens up discussion of religion to the democracy. He summarizes the pillars on which religious belief stand in England in four points: 1.) most people believe religion is pragmatically necessary as a basis for morality, 2.) most people accept the testimony and witness of others to spiritual experiences, 3.) most people consider man to have progressed beyond other animals to a level of unique spiritual dignity, 4.) and most people accept some form of creation myth.⁴⁴ The pragmatic

⁴² William James, *Varieties*, 13 (the italics are James's).

⁴³ G. K. Chesterton, "Return of the Angels," *Daily News*, March 14, 1903.

⁴⁴ G. K. Chesterton, "Return of the Angels," *Daily News*, March 14, 1903.

usefulness or necessity of religious belief is the foremost of these in Chesterton's responses to Blatchford. Like James he judges religion based on "the fruits of the spirit." "The fulfillments pour in upon us with so natural and continual a cataract that at last is reached that paradox of condition which is real belief. We have seen so many evidences of the theory that we have forgotten them all. The theory is so clear to us that we can scarcely defend it." The pragmatic method of judging belief makes natural theology irrelevant, as it did for James.

Chesterton's formulations of his own attitude towards religion in the Blatchford controversy also echo a Jamesian indulgent, but agnostic, sympathy for those who believe on the basis of spiritual experience. "Are there or are there not certain powers and experiences possible to the human mind which really occur when that mind is suitably disposed? Or is it a chronicle of real things, which we happen not to be able to do, and real visions, which we happen not to be able to see?" Chesterton asked. "Is there or is there not a certain normal human power, the power of faith, and are there or are there not certain human experiences which follow it, alleged experiences which range from receiving assurances to working miracles?"⁴⁵ James argued that supernatural experiences were most likely continuous with natural experiences, that what were taken as spiritual experiences may be explained as "incursion[s] from the subconscious region."⁴⁶ He argued for what he called "piecemeal supernaturalism," a pluralistic pantheism, a divinity

⁴⁵ Chesterton, "Faith and the Fantastic," *Daily News*, November 28, 1903.

⁴⁶ William James, *Varieties*, 466. The postscript is dedicated to James's explanation of his "piecemeal supernaturalism," which he explained further in *Pluralistic Universe* (1909).

divided up and available to each individual. There was no telling, James said, whether such a natural supernaturalism might not allow for miracles, even for personal immortality. As Chesterton said, “What Nature might contain or do under extraordinary conditions no one knows.”⁴⁷

Such things as birth and death and dreams are at once so impenetrable and so provocative that to ask men to put them aside, and have no hopes or theories about them, is like asking them not to look at a comet or not to look out the answer to a riddle . . . But if we take a large and lucid view of mankind we shall be driven to the conclusion that nothing is upon the whole so natural as supernaturalism.⁴⁸

This romantic agnosticism towards the Victorian agnosticism of reason led his readers to place him with the “new humanist” movement.

Chesterton did not, however, give any evidence of circumscribing what he called the “world-old chorus of witness” by a Jamesian narrative of the progressive evolution of the spiritual faculty or “mystical common sense.”⁴⁹ In *Varieties* James classifies the hundreds of testimonies of spiritual or “psychic” experience he had collected based on their pragmatic usefulness in fulfilling humanity’s spiritual needs at any given moment in its spiritual evolution. In judging the spiritual needs of his own age, James uses categories proposed by Francis Newman (brother of John Henry Newman) to convey to his British audience what he calls the “utter Americanism” of his vision of man’s highest spiritual need at the contemporary moment. Modern man, he says, is faced with the awesome

⁴⁷ G. K. Chesterton, “The Incredible,” *Daily News*, January 9, 1904.

⁴⁸ G. K. Chesterton, “The Meaning of Dreams,” *Daily News*, 1901.

⁴⁹ G. K. Chesterton, “Faith and the Fantastic,” *Daily News*, November 28, 1903.

power of nature and is struck with a deep loneliness and yearning for some intimate union with the cosmos. Those who require some all-embracing unity are “twice-born” (using Francis Newman’s categories); those who never feel the horror of spiritual emptiness are “once-born” and have not yet evolved spiritually, but remain on an inferior, animal plane.

James created a narrative of the spiritual evolution of humanity that was partly racial and partly religious. The ‘Latin races’ (the Italians, the French) have not evolved spiritually, James says, either from hereditary inferiority, or from the inhibiting force of the Roman Catholic tradition, which, with its pantheon of palliative devotions and practice of frequent confession, prevents the full flood of fear, horror, and guilt from reaching the necessary climax for spiritual evolution. The English-speaking peoples appreciate most fully the modern pragmatic need for unity, James says, because they have the most advanced sense of the chaos and irrationality of the cosmos. Protestantism, beginning with Luther’s doctrine of the total depravity of nature resulting from original sin, prepared the ground for their spiritual evolution.

Chesterton was averse to racial distinctions between ‘Latins’ and ‘Teutons,’ and he did not tend to idealize Anglo-American religious experience as the furthest advanced. Where James places liberalism at the culmination of a long evolution of the Anglo-American religious sensibility, Chesterton is less certain of where to place it historically. In James’s narrative the tragic sensibility of reformed Christianity is the crucial evolution that differentiates modern religion from the religious naivete of past ages. At one point Chesterton evokes this narrative of a once-born/twice-born spiritual evolution, but with less of a denigrating attitude towards pre-modern belief. “Paganism is that general vague

belief in the world of spirits which is simply a part of the enduring common sense of man-kind . . . Modern belief must go beyond paganism, must find something that pierces deeper than this idle elvishness, and touches the things, tender and tragic, which are akin to Christianity.”⁵⁰

Chesterton may have resisted a progressive narrative of liberal religious development because Blatchford claimed a very similar evolutionary narrative culminating in secular socialism. “There are some who maintain, like Mr. Blatchford, that the religious experience of the ages was abnormal, a youthful morbidity, a nightmare from which he is gradually awaking. There are others, like myself, who think that on the contrary it is the modern rationalist civilization which is abnormal, a loss of ancient powers of perception or ecstasy in feverish cynicism of cities and empires.”⁵¹ Chesterton’s resistance to the idea of progress led him to accept as pragmatically justifiable “overbeliefs” many things that James refused to accept. He was wary of circumscribing in advance the kinds of religious experience to be evaluated and shaping it into a progressive narrative. “The truth is that history is so chaotic and man so varied that by judicious selection you can represent social evolution as having tended to anything you choose.”⁵²

⁵⁰ G. K. Chesterton, “A Book of the Day: A Book From Ireland,” *Daily News*, 1905 [review of W. B. Yeats, *Stories of Red Hanrahan* (Dun Emer Press, Dundrum)].

⁵¹ G. K. Chesterton, “What Happens to Rational People,” *Daily News*, December 12, 1903.

⁵² G. K. Chesterton, “What Happens to Rational People,” *Daily News*, December 12, 1903. See also G. K. Chesterton, “Chaos,” *Daily News*, May 9, 1903.

The most notable difference in their thought was Chesterton's apparent dissent from James's claim that religion had progressed towards greater and greater individualism, moving away from a reliance on institutions and traditions to an appreciation an intensely personal experience of guilt, horror, and redemption. James made this "circumscription of the topic" a prerequisite for his analyses: "Religion...as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us *the feelings, acts, experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.*"⁵³ James rejected the idea that the religious experience of the English-speaking peoples was reflected in an institutional church or historic theological tradition, an idea he saw embodied in the figure of John Henry Newman. James therefore saw Newman's conversion to Roman Catholicism as a rejection of the English-speaking religious heritage.

Chesterton, on the other hand, took the popular impulse to found or join religious congregations as a sign that such institutional structures might also be pragmatically acceptable. If a democratic tradition continues to support "all the popes, councils, persecutions, and massacres," then they may not be "a roccoco and rather incredible fuss about nothing" but testimony to the spiritual value of religious institutions. Although some readers did not grasp Chesterton's openness to religious institutions—"if everyone thought as he does," one reader said, "there would be no formal religion in the world, but only that individual communion of consciousness with its self-consciousness which constitutes genuine religion"—it eventually led socialists in the Broad Church movement

⁵³ James, *Varieties*, "Chapter 2, Circumscription of the Topic," 36. (The italics are James's.)

to hope that Chesterton would be more sympathetic to the idea of a humanistic “State Church” than James.⁵⁴

Blatchford seemed inclined to drop his debate with Chesterton altogether if mere agnostic sympathy with the popular “overbeliefs” of the masses and no defense of any particular “superstition or dogma of all the forms of religion” was involved.⁵⁵ Chesterton’s occasional assertion of his own genuine Christian belief elicited demands, from Blatchford and others, that he define what he meant by Christianity. Chesterton responded rather tentatively. “The belief that a certain human being who we call Christ stood to a certain supernatural Being whom we call God in a certain unique transcendental relation which we call sonship . . . and a large number of other mystical dogmas ranging from the mystical dogma that man is the image of God to the mystical dogma that all men are equal, and that babies should not be strangled.” And he returned to the pragmatic and historical claim that “even those who cannot intellectually accept any supernatural conception should,” he said, “be sympathetic to Christianity, “for the mere sake of the ethical interest of the thing, and the good which it did for humanity.”⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Alistair Crowley, “Mr. Crowley and the Creeds, and The Creed of Mr. Chesterton,” pamphlet, British Library, date? Crowley suggests that the Rationalist Press Association bring out Chesterton’s articles as secularist pamphlets. “Our Pantosympatheticist is himself an agnostic.”

⁵⁵ Robert Blatchford, letter to the editor, *Daily News*, March 15, 1903. Another letter the same day, expresses agreement with what he calls Chesterton’s pantheism. Chesterton replied in his next article that pantheism did not serve the same useful function as Christian belief, because “the ‘All,’ the ‘Cosmos’ quickly becomes a mental abstraction.”

⁵⁶ G. K. Chesterton, “The God of the Tribe,” *Daily News*, April 14, 1906.

He evidently felt more confident in the historic connection between the Christian religious tradition and English liberalism, than he was in any specific Christian doctrines. Blatchford's simultaneous attack on liberalism and Christianity seemed to have awakened Chesterton to the connection between the two. "[T]he modern world is at war with Liberalism as much as it is at war with Christianity." "This war," he thought, "may be a good thing if it leads us to question Liberalism sufficiently to discover its enduring truth . . . the chief Liberal principle . . . government by the people."⁵⁷ The defense of liberalism was also leading him to examine Christianity in an effort to discover *its* "enduring truth."

⁵⁷ G. K. Chesterton, "The Alphabet of the Liberal," *Daily News*, January 21, 1904,

Chapter 4: G. K. Chesterton's *Heretics* (1905)

In the midst of the Blatchford controversy, Chesterton published a collection of essays entitled *Heretics* (June 1905). The book attracted widespread attention and represented Chesterton's arrival as a public moralist recognized as a nonsectarian voice for "Christian England."¹ The Anglo-Boer War was over, and public opinion was in reaction against the jingoism, the high casualties, and "methods of brutality" of the war for empire. Chesterton no longer seemed the radical "minority within a minority" he had been in 1900, when the Conservatives managed to equate patriotism with a pro-government/pro-war position in the "Khaki election." His radical wartime message, that an Englishman could be a patriot without being an imperialist, now found a more receptive public.² The *Sunday Times* identified Chesterton as "one of the most earnest of the little band of young Liberals and Nationalists who are protesting against the bluster of Imperialism," and summed up the book without hostility. "We are told that a new spirit

¹ For an account of the revival of Nonconformity, the ecumenism of its renewed vitality after the Boer War see Stephen Koss, *Nonconformity in Modern British Politics* (Hamden, Conn.: Archon Books, 1975), especially chapter 2 and 3. See also James Mark Purcell, "The Edwardian Populism of Chesterton's Art," *Chesterton Review*, vol. VI, no. 2 (1980), 217: "If a writer like Chesterton had the requisite intellectual personality and productivity, he set out not to write a bestseller or Great English Novel/Poem, but to build a loyal, repeat-buying public. He became a recognizable brand name, an image; one knew his initials or his in-group nickname."

² It seems to have been *Heretics* that attracted a job offer from the *Illustrated London News*: "The nation that produces Mr. G. K. Chesterton cannot be degenerate... He is touchingly convinced that he is a Liberal and says so often, even when his arguments are implicitly declaring him the closest of Conservatives." *Illustrated London News*, July 8, 1905 (This July review seems to be the first notice taken of him in that paper; they offered him a position in September).

will assert a passionate nationalism against both the cosmopolitanism of the Victorian period at its beginning and the Imperial ideas at its close.”³

At the same time, *Heretics* kept alive questions in the public mind, as the greatest political victory for English Nonconformity approached, about Chesterton’s relationship to the “historic Christian churches” he championed. His idea of a whiggish narrative of English history in which the nation’s liberal political constitution and Christian heritage went hand-in-hand was generic enough to the Whig tradition. Yet he seemed to disagree with Froude, Freeman, and Green who had identified British Protestantism or “Puritan England” as the protagonist of the Whig narrative. How Chesterton defined Christian “orthodoxy” became crucial to understanding how he defined England as the continuous subject of the national history.

Chesterton begins *Heretics* by arguing that nations spring from a communal allegiance to some philosophy or “orthodoxy” about human life and develop only so long as the national community continues to agree on the assumed national “orthodoxy.”⁴ It is natural and necessary for a community to hold up for itself some ideal of “the right life” or “the good man.” “Nationality exists, and has nothing in the world to do with race,”

³ Review of C.F.G. Masterman’s chapter on Chesterton, “The Blasphemy of Optimism,” in *In Peril of Change*, *Sunday Times*, June 18, 1905; Also Review of *Heretics*, *Sunday Times*, June 25, 1905.

⁴ G. K. Chesterton, “Introductory Remarks on the Importance of Orthodoxy,” *Heretics* (1905), *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol. I (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986). The “heretics” of the book’s title are those who would mislead the Englishman regarding his true national identity. The form of the book—a series of essays on topics as various as the “yellow press,” “celts and celtophiles,” and “slum novelists”—does not immediately lend itself to realizing the unity of Chesterton’s argument, which emerges from his criticism of a wide range of cultural phenomena.

Chesterton insists. "Nationality is a thing like a church or a secret society; it is a product of the human soul and will; it is a spiritual product."⁵ He therefore applauds Kipling's *Soldiers Three*, G. Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man*, and H. G. Wells's *Time Machine*, as three works that take up the task of setting forth a national ideal for the new century.⁶ On examining their particular proposals, however, Chesterton declares the imperialists and socialists to be "heretics" in light of England's democratic tradition. The idea of a spiritual aristocracy that underlies their proposals is at odds, he insists, with English radicalism. Chesterton then argues that the Christian tradition had proved itself useful to the nation as the guardian of the ideals of liberty and equality against all such "heretics." He suggests that a whiggish narrative of the fundamental continuity of Christianity in England is a necessary complement to the whiggish narrative of England's peculiarly liberal history.

Chesterton argues that English liberalism stagnated towards the end of the nineteenth-century by developing into a refusal of all ideals, and was replaced by an essentially anti-national belief in racial evolution that ran all mankind together along a spectrum of development. English patriotism almost died in the 1890s, Chesterton says. The decadent aesthetes of the period—Wilde, Whistler, Beardsley—proclaimed the idea of "art for art's sake" and refused to engage religion, morality, or politics, and late Victorian politicians and historians "drank down Darwin ceaselessly and silently." The end of the nineteenth-century was a kind of hiatus in the work of defining and championing some national "ethical ideal" or "visionary religion."

⁵ G. K. Chesterton, "Celts and Celtophiles," *Heretics* (1905), 133.

⁶ G. K. Chesterton, "Concluding Remarks," *Heretics* (1905), 199.

The late Victorian period saw England's liberal identity replaced by a racial identity, but, Chesterton says, racial identity is essentially anti-national, and cannot properly be considered a new national "orthodoxy." "No man alive, with even a glimmering of real scientific sense, would ever dream of applying the terms 'Celtic' or 'Teutonic' . . . in any positive or useful sense."⁷ After the English renounced democracy as a national ideal, they had to look for some other way to distinguish 'the heart of the Empire' from the colonies. "England and the English governing class never did call on this absurd deity of race until it seemed, for an instant, that they had no other god to call on."⁸

This period of "Victorian prudery and silence" with regard to the national orthodoxy could not last, Chesterton says., because a spiritual identity or ideal is a pragmatic necessity for a nation as for a man. The search for "a sane religion" inevitably begins again, he says, because "if you leave the spirit of idolatry running loose, some people will worship anything, even a Bengal tiger or a piece of rotten cheese."⁹ Kipling, Shaw, and Wells at least recognized that they could not "substitute the ideal of race for the ideal of nationality" but must propose some "purely spiritual" quality, some "great spiritual coherence" that would have the power to absorb the various groups within the

⁷ G. K. Chesterton, "Celts and Celtophiles," *Heretics* (1905), 133. "That sort of thing must be left to people who talk about the Anglo-Saxon race, and extend the expression to America. How much of the blood of Anglo-Saxons remains in our mixed British, Roman, German, Dane, Norman, and Picard stock is a matter only interesting to wild antiquaries. And how much of the diluted blood can possibly remain in that roaring whirlpool of America into which a cataract of Swedes, Jews, Germans, Irishmen, and Italians is perpetually pouring, is a matter only interesting to lunatics."

⁸ Chesterton, "Celts and Celtophiles," *Heretics*, 133.

⁹ Interview with Chesterton, *Public Opinion*, September 29, 1905.

nation or the empire. They captured the public's attention when they proposed new national "orthodoxies" after the silence of the late-Victorian period, "years of yawning . . . like hours of an afternoon 'At Home' in a rich house on a rainy day when nobody comes to call." "[A]t least their Union Jacks and red ties interrupted the twilight of that infernal afternoon."¹⁰ (Chesterton's appreciations were just as ringing and memorable as his criticisms in these essays, and this ecelecticisim began to gain him an audience that crossed conventional political boundaries.)

Kipling, he says, held up the "ideal of discipline" to the nation—the "miracle of organization" embodied in the modern army. "The truly Kiplingite ideal" is "that interdependence and efficiency which belongs to engineers, or sailors, or mules, or railway engines." Kipling realized the "romance of the division of labour and the discipline of all trades" and held it out to an ideal-starved nation. But Kipling is mistaken. Discipline and order are not, Chesterton says, the peculiarly English ideals. "Mr. Kipling is naturally a cosmopolitan. He happens to find his examples in the British Empire, but almost any other empire would do as well, or indeed, any other highly civilized country. That which he admire in the British army he would find even more apparent in the German army; that which he admires in the British police he would find flourishing in the French police." Kipling, Chesterton says, "knows England as an intelligent Englishman knows Venice," and never manages to approach England with "the loyalty of children

¹⁰ Chesterton, "The Evil Day," *Daily News*, June 26, 1909. Chesterton expresses succinctly in this later article, the argument he makes in the introduction and conclusion of *Heretics*, and which he later repeated in *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1911).

and the great patience of poets” necessary for understanding an “ancient civilization with strange virtues buried like treasures.”

Chesterton similarly dismisses Shaw’s “religion of the Superman” as a German-imported ideal. Shaw submitted to a “new master, Nietzsche,” when he failed to sympathetically understand England’s popular culture and the democratic ideal embedded there. “Shaw cannot understand that the thing which is valuable and lovable in our eyes is man—the old beer-drinking, creed-making, fighting, failing, sensual, respectable man.” Similarly Wells, with his ideal of a Utopia run by an elite of social scientists, failed to understand the “old rude tales and old rude ballads” of England, the story of “Jack the Giant Killer” and Robin Hood. England’s “old literature” contained “only two kinds of songs,” Chesterton says, “The first was a rejoicing that the weak had conquered the strong, the second a lamentation that the strong, had, for once in a way, conquered the weak.” “The moment Robin Hood becomes a sort of Superman, that moment the chivalrous chronicler shows us Robin thrashed by a poor tinker whom he thought to thrust aside.”¹¹

Chesterton regretfully sets Kipling, Shaw, and Wells aside as “heretics” and proposes a reassertion of the early Victorian romantic liberalism as England’s national “orthodoxy.”¹² The English ideal, revealed especially in literature, is “free-will, which is

¹¹ Chesterton, “Mr. Bernard Shaw,” and “H. G. Wells and the Giants,” *Heretics* (1905).

¹² See also, Chesterton, “The Decline of the Amateur Politician,” *Black and White*, in 1904-1905 series, “The Creed of a Credulous Person.”

The democratic sentiment [is] an absolute and semi-religious matter . . . The nature of the democratic sentiment is very much more dark and spiritual than most of us fancy or any of us could easily express; and it is undoubtedly concerned with things much deeper than forms of

the valour and dignity of the soul,” Chesterton says. The English believe in man’s “immortality,” which Chesterton takes as meaning imperviousness to heredity, circumstance, and influence. “In all great comic literature, in *Tristram Shandy* or *Pickwick*, there is this sense of space and incorruptibility; we feel the characters are deathless people in an endless tale.” The English idealize the virtue of humility, the ability to laugh at one’s self, to reveal weakness and strong emotion without embarrassment, and to maintain a “reverent agnosticism towards the complexities of the soul.”

It is not merely true that all the most typical English men of letters, like Shakespeare and Dickens, Richardson and Thackeray, were sentimentalists . . . In the great Elizabethan age, when the English nation was finally hammered out, in the great eighteenth century when the British Empire was being built up everywhere, where in all these times, where was this symbolic stoical Englishman who dresses in drab and black and represses his feelings? Were the Elizabethan palladins and pirates like

government or external rights of citizens, or even theories of social manners. It is concerned with crowds and daylight and everyday things and people but it is nonetheless in itself a mystery.

[Hearty abuse of the lower class, attributing all sorts of vices to them, is not really an expression of aristocratic sentiment] But if [there is someone who] says smilingly that, of course, one must remember that these people have not our advantages, that they are on a different plane, and must be educated gradually and kindly, then my democratic friend, do not hesitate: rush to the window and cry to the surging mob outside...

The new fashion in Western Europe and America is the fashion of a certain professional and fussy benevolence of the upper and middle classes towards the poor. There has arisen to rule the world, lifted upon the shields of the Fabian Society, the Expert, the last and worst oppressors of mankind, and the rise of the Expert means the decline of the citizen. That is, it means the decline of the amateur politician.

For the real argument for democracy is not in the least that the people govern best; the real argument for democracy is the theory, right or wrong, that government is one of the things it gives men a necessary and noble satisfaction to do for ourselves...The only earthly argument that there is for democracy is that citizenship is a thing like love-making and ought to be delegated as little as possible.

that? Were any of them like that . . . The English Puritans repressed a good deal, but even they were too English to repress their feelings.¹³

The “essentially romantic Englishman,” with his democratic assumption of the common nature and dignity of man, “that living and invigorating ideal of England must be looked for in the masses; it must be looked for where Dickens found it—Dickens, among whose glories it was to be a humorist, to be a sentimentalist, to be an optimist, to be a poor man, to be an Englishman, but the greatest of whose glories was that he saw all mankind in its amazing and tropical luxuriance, and did not even notice the aristocracy.”¹⁴

The ideal of democracy is always threatened, Chesterton says, by the ideal of aristocracy, but the end of the Victorian era saw aristocracy taking the form of “that silly Teutonism which knows as little about England as it does about anthropology, but which is always talking about Vikings.” Aristocracy idealizes virtues directly opposed to humility and a sentimental love of all men. Aristocratic education inculcates the idea that “there is something English in the repression of one’s feelings” and claims that stoicism is a sign of strength and rationality and the right to rule. “This ideal of self-repression,” Chesterton insists, “is not English.” It might be “slightly Prussian, but in the main it does not come, I think, from any racial or national source. It is, as I have said, in some sense aristocratic; it comes not from a people, but from a class.” The English may have achieved a democratic franchise through a series of reform bills, but at the same time a “fundamentally undemocratic quality” grew in those classes that were still the “governing classes.”¹⁵

¹³ G. K. Chesterton, “Smart Novelists and the Smart Set,” *Heretics* (1905), 154.

¹⁴ G. K. Chesterton, “Smart Novelists and the Smart Set,” *Heretics* (1905), 156.

¹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, “Slum Novelists and the Slums,” *Heretics* (1905), 189.

The imperialists and socialists, with their concern for national efficiency and their sociological studies, were also the harbingers of a new form of aristocratic attitude. They treated the urban poor and imperial subjects not as equal citizens in the nation, but as some foreign or primitive people. Their plans for state-organized, expert-directed social reform, education reform, and eugenics reveal their “heresy.”¹⁶ They take the old aristocratic paternalist attitude to the poor—a thoroughly undemocratic, un-English spirit, Chesterton says. The Fabian socialists and New Liberals, with their sociological studies of the poor, revealed more “aristocratic sentiment” than the old Tory aristocracy.

A poor man is a man who has not got much money. This may seem a simple and unnecessary description, but in the face of a great mass of modern fact and fiction, it seems very necessary indeed; most of our realists and sociologists talk about a poor man as if he were an octopus or an alligator. There is no more need to study the psychology of poverty than to study the psychology of bad temper, or the psychology of vanity, or the psychology of animal spirits. A man ought to know something of the emotions of an insulted man, not by being insulted, but simply by being a man. And he ought to know something of the emotions of a poor man, not by being poor, but simply by being a man. Therefore, in any writer who is describing poverty, my first objection to him will be that he has studied his subject. A democrat would have imagined it.¹⁷

Chesterton believed that the English would cling to the old aristocracy of land and wealth when threatened with a new aristocracy of social scientists.¹⁸

¹⁶ See also account of Chesterton’s lecture, under the auspices of the Independent Labour Party, to a packed Berkley Hall in Glasgow, on “New Dangers”: “Democracy is an absolute truth and Socialism might come to be opposed to democracy, [if the specialist or scientist replaces the common man as governor].” “There is no such thing as a natural ruler if you believe as a dogma in the rule of the common man.” *Labour Leader*, December 8, 1905.

¹⁷ G. K. Chesterton, “Slum Novelists and the Slums,” *Heretics* (1905), 191.

¹⁸ Chesterton, “A Book of the Day: A Defense of Aristocracy,” *Daily News*, June 1, 1906 (review of Oscar Levy’s *Revival of Aristocracy*, trans. By Leonard A. Magnus). “The real object of an aristocracy was to create a small and convenient group, in which

Chesterton's case for liberalism against socialism was clear enough, but the part of his argument that most attracted reviewers' attention was his pragmatic defense of Christianity as a support for English liberalism. "The thing which is really required for the proper working of democracy is not merely the democratic system, or even the democratic philosophy, but the democratic emotion."¹⁹ Christian religion fostered "the democratic emotion" by teaching the doctrine of a common human nature beneath all differences of heredity, class, or education, and the value of this doctrine's coordinate virtue, humility. "[T]he doctrine of original sin . . . may also be described as the doctrine of the equality of men," Chesterton writes, and "the conception of the sinfulness of pride" was one of the "practical and working mysteries in the Christian tradition, and one which the Roman Catholic Church . . . has done her best work in singling out . . . Pride is a weakness of character; it dries up laughter, it dries up wonder, it dries up chivalry and energy. The Christian tradition understands this."²⁰

Chesterton poses the pragmatic question of whether England could preserve the ideals the nation owes to "the historic Christian churches" without preserving any

there could be comradeship, comprehension, and a common rule of dignity... Dr. Levy may admire tyranny and the assertion of the individual; but aristocrats never did... The real case for aristocracy is entirely sentimental; it is connected with landscape, locality, and humanising legend. It is not strong enough to reconcile me personally to having my country idiotically governed; but it is a case."

¹⁹ G. K. Chesterton, "Slum Novelists and the Slums," *Heretics* (1905), 188.

²⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, 129, 107. Also Chesterton, "The Darkness of Virtue," *Daily News*, July 28, 1906: "I feel a profound gratitude to the historic Christian Church, with its calendar of commonplace and unheard of saints. I respect it because almost alone I think among the institutions of the earth it has thought it worthwhile to record and carve in marble for ever the names of a large number of quite stupid men merely because they are good... I think we have become seriously disproportionate in our esteem for mere intelligence, sometimes for mere culture."

particular theological doctrine. In the course of a series of critical essays on various modern social movements, Chesterton concludes that some concrete doctrine is necessary, and that movements that rely purely on moral practice or the externals of public gathering without theological underpinnings failed.²¹ He holds up the Victorian neo-medievalists, Morris socialists, Celtic revivalists, even the Salvation Army as small affairs of a cultured and aesthetic elite that never managed to appeal to the mass of the English people. He returns, as a pragmatic necessity, to Christianity as the only viable religious tradition for encouraging a “democratic emotion” in the people. Pragmatism was ultimately a matter of history and the history of England pointed in the direction of Christianity.

He takes the popular celebration of Christmas as the symbol of Christianity’s success in awaking humility, humor, laughter, and a spirit of brotherhood. There is no historic evidence, he says, that any other faith will have similar results. He worries that “there is about these people,” the inventors of rival popular traditions, “a haunting and alarming something which suggests that it is just possible that they do not keep Christmas . . . do not wave spoons and shout when the pudding is set alight . . . [do not] pull crackers.” “Rationally there appears no reason why we could not sing and give each other presents in honour of anything—the birth of Michel Angelo or the opening of Euston Station. But it does not work. Men only become greedily and gloriously materialistic

²¹ G. K. Chesterton, “The Need of Doctrine in the Church,” *ILN*, October 27, 1906: “If the Church of England or any other body tries to do without doctrines, the poor will fall away from it more than ever; the poor are found wherever doctrine is found . . . If we succeed in including all creeds, we shall fail to include all classes.”

about something spiritualistic. Take away the Nicene Creed and similar things and you do some strange wrong to the sellers of sausages.”

Here is a solid and ancient festive tradition still plying a roaring trade in the streets, and they think it vulgar. If this is so, let them be certain of this, that they are the kind of people who in the time of the maypole would have thought the maypole vulgar; who in the time of the Canterbury pilgrimage would have thought the Canterbury pilgrimage vulgar; who in the time of the Olympian games would have thought the Olympian games vulgar. Let no man deceive himself; if by vulgarity we mean coarseness of speech, rowdiness of behaviour, gossip, horseplay, and some heavy drinking, vulgarity there always was wherever there was joy, wherever there was faith in the gods. Wherever you have belief you will have hilarity, wherever you have hilarity you will have some dangers. And as creed and mythology produce this gross and vigorous life, so in its turn this gross and vigorous life will always produce creed and mythology.²²

The evidence suggests that England can only recover the democratic spirit by becoming “again a religious people,” and reconnecting with the continuity of sentiment between the Olympian games, the maypole, the Canterbury pilgrimage, and Dickensian Christmases.

Chesterton called for a pragmatic recognition of England’s continuous relationship with “historic Christianity with all its sins on its head,” but as a number of reviewers noted, his lack of theological or historical specificity somewhat undercut his insistence on the need for a clear national orthodoxy. His essays were mainly critical and his language allusive with regard to the specific nature or locus of England’s Christian tradition. Some passages in *Heretics* contain echoes of William James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*. In *Varieties* James defined the English-speaking tradition of Christianity in terms of reformed theology, as a “life that supervenes on despair,” and he suggested a narrative of religious evolution from a “once-born” paganism to a “twice-

²² G. K. Chesterton, “Christmas and the Aesthetes,” *Heretics* (1905), 89.

born” religious vision, with Luther and the Protestant Reformation as the central moment, culminating in Anglo-American evangelicalism and liberal humanism. In *Heretics*, Chesterton equivocates between this Jamesian narrative of an evolution from pagan philosophy to Christian religion in which “ultimate psychological truth” of the depravity of human nature was the key to the “foundation of Christianity,” and a narrative of a fundamental continuity between the old natural religions and Christianity.²³

On the one hand, Chesterton seems to agree with James that the conviction of the depravity of nature was the “great psychological discovery” that “turned [Paganism] into Christianity,” he says. “The Christian tradition,” he says, “rests on a certain mystery of humility and almost of darkness.”

Humility is perpetually putting us back in the primal darkness. There all light is lightening, startling and instantaneous. Until we understand that original dark, in which we have neither sight nor expectation, we can give no hearty and childlike praise to the splendid sensationalism of things.²⁴

Until we realize that things might not be, we cannot realize that things are. Until we see the background of darkness we cannot admire the light as a single and created thing. As soon as we have seen that darkness, all light is lightning, sudden, blinding, and divine. Until we picture nonentity we underrate the victory of God, and can realize none of the trophies of His ancient war.²⁵

²³ William James wrote to Chesterton expressing his admiration for *Heretics*, January 17, 1906: “You certainly know how to hit truth in the pit of the stomach, and bring it down”—and to F. C. S. Schiller, January 16, 1906, encouraging him to read the book, “There’s truth for you, right in the pit of the stomach.” *William James: Selected Unpublished Correspondence, 1885-1910*, Frederick J. Down Scott, ed. (Columbus, OH, 1986); 395-6, 247-8, 261. James later quoted from *Heretics* in the first lines of *Pragmatism* (1907). Kevin L. Morris, “G. K. Chesterton and the James Brothers,” *The Chesterton Review*, November 1994, 20:4, pp. 475-85.; Kevin Morris argues plausibly that Chesterton would have been already familiar with William James’s *Varieties* when he wrote *Heretics* and that “William admired *Heretics* because he saw in it his own image reflected.”

²⁴ G. K. Chesterton, “Paganism and Mr. Lowes Dickinson,” *Heretics* (1905), 128.

²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, “Mr. Bernard Shaw,” *Heretics* (1905), 69.

To the extent that the Protestant Reformation and later evangelical revivals intensified the conviction of sin, they were central to man's religious evolution.

Elsewhere, however, Chesterton qualifies the emphasis he places on the sense of the depravity of nature as the keynote of religiosity. He notes that the despair of all earthly good, the *lacrimae rerum*, was the cry of decadent paganism before Christianity. He argues that Christianity is primarily a mythological religion of creation rather than a philosophical or pragmatic response to the problem of evil. The Christian myths of creation and incarnation ultimately reaffirm a sense of the goodness of created and restored nature.

Even if reality could be proved to be misleading, it could not be proved to be unimportant or unimpressive. Even if the facts are false, they are still very strange. And this strangeness of life, this unexpected and even perverse element of things as they fall out, remains incurably interesting . . . Life may sometimes legitimately appear as a book of science. Life may sometimes appear, and with much greater legitimacy, as a book of metaphysics. But life is always a novel. Our existence may cease to be a song; it may cease even to be a beautiful lament. Our existence may not be an intelligible justice, or even a recognizable wrong. But our existence is always a story.

Chesterton suggests that recognizing the mythological element in Christianity extends its history in a continuous line that encompasses the Judaic myth and even the pagan myths of various nations.

All that genuinely remains of the ancient hymns or the ancient dances of Europe, all that has honestly come to us from the festivals of Phoebus or Pan, is to be found in the festivals of the Christian Church. If any one wants to hold the end of a chain that really goes back to the heathen mysteries, he had better take hold of a festoon of flowers at Easter or a string of sausages at Christmas.²⁶

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, "Paganism and Mr. Lowes Dickinson," *Heretics* (1905), 124.

Chesterton suggests in *Heretics* a history of Christianity that is a whiggish history of religious continuity with a vengeance, and one that did not give pride of place to the Protestant Reformation.

Reviewers of *Heretics* felt that Chesterton's pragmatic defense of Christianity and whiggish history of a continuity of liberal and Christian England called for a reassessment of his position in the political spectrum. During the Anglo-Boer War his name was associated with others in the peace movement, most notably the socialists but also with the pacificism of the dissenting churches. Chesterton's defense of liberalism in *Heretics* and his criticism of Wells and Shaw dismayed Fabian socialist and new liberal reviewers and attracted surprised notice from more conservative papers.

There was a note of rebuke in many of the reviews from the left, sharpened by a sense of betrayal. "Mr. Chesterton is one of the disappointments of the twentieth century," wrote the reviewer for the *Birmingham Post*, because no matter how pointed his criticism, he gives no satisfactory remedy for the evils he diagnoses.

The fact is that like most modern Liberals, Mr. Chesterton is, below the surface, a rabid retrogressionist . . . He accepts our material progress as perfectly natural . . . but he does not realize that the greatest of all advances man has made in the last century is in the development of man . . . He denies the existence of or the possibility of the superman, which is as unreasonable as denying the existence of the steam engine.²⁷

His criticism of "all the new gospels put forward by the non-theological prophets of our time" is valuable, but he fails as a progressive because "he overlooks the

²⁷ 13/6/05 Birmingham Post.

influence that the great hypothesis of evolution has had upon contemporary thought.”²⁸

Mr. Chesterton concludes his opening chapter with an entertaining simile. He pictures his “distinguished contemporaries” discussing under a lamp-post which they eventually pull down. When it is down they discover that they are not at all in agreement about motive or as to the illuminating substitute. “Some pulled down the lamp-post because they wanted electric light; some because they wanted old iron; some because they wanted darkness.” It is clever. But what does Mr. Chesterton want? One can only gather that he wants to see the lamp-post (*i.e.*, the Church) left standing. But why it is preferable to electric light (which after all, we are agreed in wishing to substitute for it), whether and how it is to be re-painted, re-moulded, and so on, we do not find the least indication.²⁹

Reviewers felt the essays in *Heretics* revealed a “contempt for efficiency and progress” not previously associated with Chesterton. “We do not know for example if he believes in physical degeneration but if so he would allow it to continue unimpeded . . . We find him to be an apostle of unreason who would let things drift rather than have them controlled.” The *Clarion* reviewer said cryptically that Chesterton was a “genial Conservative,” although clearly not “in a political sense”; how could one square the fact that “Mr. Chesterton is Radical with Socialistic sympathies, and a defender or apologist of certain old faiths and institutions”?³⁰

At the same time that Chesterton succeeded in throwing socialists into confusion about his position, he also gained attention from conservatives. “The nation that the

²⁸ 8/05 Literary Guide; 5/7/05 Bradford Observer.

²⁹ 8/05 Literary Guide.

³⁰ A. E. Fletcher, “Chesterton Brothers,” *Clarion*, June, 16, 1905.

produces Mr. G. K. Chesterton cannot be degenerate.”³¹ Chesterton was accepted as advocating a Jamesian “healthy-minded” will to believe, necessary to recover Little England or even possibly to sustain the British empire. “The decay of belief means the decay of manhood and progress.”

The healthy man, Chesterton says, produces ideals as a healthy plant produces flowers. We must be healthy again before we can think rightly . . . Mr. Chesterton exhorts us to delight in the world as it is. We have only to be aware of the wonder and glory of existing men and things to reach a healthy state of mind and with health will come ideals and an aim in life.³²

In general, the reaction to *Heretics* was a mixture of was enthusiasm and confusion: Chesterton “perceives a thousand truths but no consistent body of truths,” he presents “a young philosophy not the less interesting because it is never systematized.”³³ A pragmatic defense of religious belief was welcome, but unsatisfactory: “All I can gather of his own doctrine is his belief that everyone else ought to have one. I shall not begin to worry about my philosophy until Mr. Chesterton discloses his.”³⁴ *Heretics* left the public unable precisely to “make out Mr. Chesterton’s spiritual ancestry.”³⁵

The eclecticism of Chesterton’s religious-cultural commentary appealed to a broad spectrum of readers and he was quickly becoming a dominant presence in English religious discussion. Chesterton’s ideas regarding Christianity and democracy intrigued

³¹ 8/7/05 *Illustrated London News*.

³² A. Clutton-Brock, “The Philosophy of Wonder,” *Speaker*, June, 17, 1905.

³³ *Black and White*, July 8, 1905; *Scotsman*, June 12, 1905.

³⁴ G. S. Street, *Outlook*, June 17, 1905.

³⁵ *Christian Leader*, July, 6, 1905.

many and his insistence on the need for a real engagement with theology and not merely the external trappings of a state religion increasingly found an audience. For example, the Anglican editor of *Church Times* and the Islington and Highgate Free Church Councils, inspired by Chesterton's principle that "theology unites and religion divides," organized a series of summer "theological lectures and discussions" between High Churchmen and Nonconformists in Finchley Park. They insisted that any unification of English Christian churches must begin, as Chesterton had said, with theological discussion among Christians themselves and not with nationalization and a state-authorized, state-directed transformation of liturgy for joint worship.³⁶ Three other events also highlight his central position in the discussion of England's religious identity and history during these years. He acquired a second weekly forum, taking over the weekly "Our Notebook" column in the *Illustrated London News*, and he spoke at the evangelical St. Paul's, Covent Garden and St. Paul's Cathedral, stirring up religious controversy and comment in his wake.

The *Illustrated London News* position signaled that Chesterton had gained a certain standing as a figure within the national consensus of opinion, just as John Morley's selection of him to write the Browning biography for the *English Men of Letters* signaled his standing within Liberal circles.³⁷ "Our Notebook" in the *Illustrated*

³⁶ *Manchester Guardian*, May 6, 1907; *North Midlands Chronicle*, August 3, 1907. Chesterton delivered a lecture to the last of these meetings on "Is Theology Dry?" (The lecture title was no doubt a joking reference to the temperance movement.)

³⁷ The *Daily News* had a certain national status as Dickens's paper, despite being a paper of the Liberal opposition. The *Illustrated London News* was even more a venerable national paper; founded in 1842 as the first illustrated paper, it surpassed even the *Times* in circulation in the 1890s, and by Chesterton's day was considered a national institution, with a large readership in America and English-speaking the empire. Lawrence J. Clipper, "Introduction," *The Collected Works of G. K. Chesterton*, vol.

London News was considered a famous spot; the man who filled it became “as familiar to the literary world as its eggs and bacon.”³⁸ In 1905, besides the weekly *Daily News* and *Illustrated London News* columns, the public could read Chesterton in *A Book of Daily Guidance from Master Minds*, in a *Thought for the Day* collection of excerpts, or in his “Every Day Philosophy” series in *Public Opinion*.³⁹ He was invited to speak on the state of Christianity in England at various churches and to contribute articles for various Christian papers.⁴⁰ In 1906 he was invited to contribute “broad church” hymns for the English Hymnal.⁴¹ With reason Blatchford jokingly complained that the public read

XXVII (San Francisco, 1986). Chesterton wrote continuous weekly articles for the ILN from 1905 until his death in 1937, a total of 1, 535 essays. Clipper calls this “surely one of the most phenomenal, one-man performances in the history of journalism.” Ignatius Press has collected the entire series in 8 volumes.

³⁸ *Daily Mirror*, September 27, 1905; *Daily Chronicle*, September 26, 1905; *Morning Leader*, September 26, 1905; *Morning Advertiser*, September 26, 1905; *Daily News*, September 27, 1905 (“It has been said that Mr. Chesterton thinks in turns of weekly causeries and the Divine Image.”); *Illustrated Sporting News*, September 30, 1905; *Gazette*, September 1905; *Sketch*, September 1905; *East Anglia Daily Times*, September 27, 1905; *Lloyd’s Weekly News*, October 1, 1905; *Star*, September 29, 1905; *Liverpool Courier*, September 9, 1905; *Globe*, September 30, 1905; *Gloucester Citizen*, September 27, 1905; *Glasgow Herald*, September 30, 1905; *Weeks Survey*, September 30, 1905; *Star*, September 30, 1905; *Irish Independent*, September 27, 1905; *Sketch*, October 4, 1905; *Western Weekly News*, September 30, 1905; *Lady’s Pictorial*, October 7, 1905; *Eastern Morning News*, October 3, 1905; *Doncaster Chronicle*, September 30, 1905.

³⁹ *Tribune*, January 1, 1906; *Tribune*, February 16, 1906; *Pall Mall Gazette*, June, 21, 1906.

⁴⁰ “Why am I a Christian?” Sunday address at the Ealing Congregational Church, reported in *Glasgow Herald*, February 25, 1905, and more fully in the *Ealing Gazette*, April 15, 1905, which also reported that the address would be repeated at All Saints Church, Notting Hill.

⁴¹ *Daily News*, April 14, 1906; *Standard*, April 13, 1906; *Christian World*, April 19, 1906; *Christian Commonwealth*, May 3, 1906; *Glasgow Daily*, April 14, 1906; *Tribune*, May 25, 1906.

Chesterton as a substitute for Sunday Church attendance.⁴² One Saturday column would elicit a flood of correspondence and exchange on religious topics.⁴³ Everyone seemed to be reading Chesterton on English religion. The *Lady's Pictorial* even suggested that he “ought to be provided by the nation with a handsome income in order that his services might be retained for the evolution of new and original ideas.”⁴⁴

He was invited to give one of the “Vox Populi, Vox Dei” Lenten lunch time lectures at St. Paul’s, Covent Garden, an experimental series of sermons by laymen, and a strikingly visual image of Chesterton as a new English reformer was painted in the press. The lecture, entitled “Christianity and Democracy,” was a success and reinforced his

⁴² *Clarion*, June, 13, 1906. Chesterton in his *Autobiography* echoed Blatchford, “I was described, in the phrase of the time, as having a Saturday pulpit, rather like a Sunday pulpit. Whatever the merits of the sermon, it is probable that I had a larger congregation than I have ever had before or since” (118).

⁴³ One article, for example, drew 14 letters to the editor: hailing Chesterton for revealing the necessity of religion in providing society with an “ethical dynamic,” berating him as failing to see that a new faith of goodness and humanity, altruism, and “practical, sanitary, and sociable” morality would replace the religious revivals of the past, and denying that Christianity had any role in cultivating English democracy. Correspondence, *Daily News*, August 16, 17, 18, 1905. On the same topic, also *Daily News*, August, 2, 31, and September 1, 4, 11.

⁴⁴ *Lady's Pictorial*, March 18, 1905. Also A. A. Milne, “Modern Fairy Tales: The Story of Mr. Chesterton’s Ubiquity,” *Vanity Fair* July 6, 1905 (in which three princes search the whole world in order to find a paper without a single reference to or article by GK); *Vanity Fair*, August 20, 1905, “Travelling on the top of a car the other day from Trent Bridge to Mapperley I was interested in the books carried by my fellow-passengers. Strangely enough, three of them happened to be carrying works by Mr. G. K. Chesterton, an author whose popularity, though only recently acquired, is evidently very general. Two ladies who got on the car were carrying his *Browning* and *The Napoleon of Notting Hill*, and a gentleman at the Mapperley terminus had *The Club of Queer Trades*.” Also *Free Lance*, March 3, 1906, carried a spoof of Chesterton’s *Napoleon of Notting Hill*, in which Chesterton captures, but is finally forced to surrender Printing House Square.

authority as a public voice of the future for English Christianity. Against the backdrop of St. Paul's, the "old Evangelical landmark of London" that had "an unbroken list of vicars dating back to Puritan days," Chesterton's lay sermon was an "experiment" that was "carefully watched with a view to adoption at other churches and dioceses."⁴⁵ The "huge church . . . was crowded to the doors, the immense congregation, composed mostly of men," but including a variety of classes, "ranged from market porters to young ladies of an obviously 'literary' stamp."⁴⁶ "Mr. Chesterton's six-foot frame and strong, pleasant face, gave him a distinguished pulpit appearance."⁴⁷ "Mr. Chesterton, who wore the regulation black Geneva gown . . . [was] escorted to the pulpit by the vicar, the congregation singing, 'Hold the Fort for I am Coming.'" The press took Chesterton's appearance as a lay lecturer as a sign "'Sacerdotalism' indeed is moribund."⁴⁸ He took as his text the scripture passage that Catholic Christianity associates with the founding of a hierarchical church of popes, bishops, and priests, Christ's words, "Thou art Peter, and

⁴⁵ *Examiner*, April 13, 1905; "An Experiment," *Vanity Fair*, March 23, 1905.

⁴⁶ *World*, March 25, 1905; *Manchester Courier* and *Manchester Weekly*, March 17, 1905. Also *York's Observer*, May 17, 1905: "There were market porters, clerks, shopmen, writers of books, journalists, and a good sprinkling of young ladies."

⁴⁷ *Sheffield Telegraph*, March 17, 1905.

⁴⁸ "Lent in London: Lay Lectures," *Daily Chronicle*, April 21, 1905. Chesterton appears to have repeated the lecture at St. Paul's Cathedral under the auspices of the Christian Social Union in the summer of 1905: See "The Press in the Pulpit," *Sheffield Telegraph*, June 28, 1905 (which announced the lectures); reports appeared in *Glasgow Herald*, August 10, 1905, *Liverpool Courier*, August 4, 1905, *Literary World* September 1905, and *Church Times*, September 8, 1905: "The ordinary man, he urges, is the cornerstone of Christianity, and what science denies is not God but man... [This] brings us round to Rousseauism after all, as does the other of Mr. Chesterton's contentions, that every child, because it is human, is already, before baptism, a member of Christ."

upon this rock I will build my Church.” In his usual “paradoxical” style, Chesterton drew from this passage that Christianity was founded on the doctrine of equality. One can perhaps get an idea of the content of the lecture from a similar argument in the chapter on Shaw in *Heretics*:

When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing His great society, He chose for its cornerstone neither the brilliant Paul nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a snob, a coward—in a word, a man. And upon this rock He has built His Church, and the gates of Hell have not prevailed against it. All the empires and kingdoms have failed, because of this continual and inherent weakness, that they were founded by strong men and upon strong men. But this one thing, the historic Christian Church, was founded on a weak man, and for that reason it is indestructible.

The public was amused and interested and believed that Chesterton’s work as public moralist might lead the way to a disestablishment of the Anglican Church that would not impair the Christian character of the nation.⁴⁹

He was invited to speak on “The Religious Education Difficulty” at the Chapter House of St. Paul’s Cathedral, where his criticism of established religious education turned quickly into a critique of a kind of established agnosticism. He spoke against the 1902 Conservative education compromise, which continued the established church’s privileged position in national religion. He proposed that either the clergy of various denominations should have right of entry into the schools or there should be a complete

⁴⁹ See accounts of lecture on “The Greatest Disaster of the Church of England,” in Queen’s College Hall, “packed with undergraduates,” which was considered to be the big event of Michaelmas term at Oxford that year. *British Weekly*, October 27, December 14, 1905. Accounts of his lecture to the Nottingham meeting of Church leaders sponsored by the CSU, chaired by the Bishop of Birmingham, with an audience of 2,500. *Nottingham Guardian* November 25, 28, 1905; *Manchester Guardian*, November 30, 1905; *Times*, November 30, 1905; *Yorkshire Post*, December 6, 1905. And his Helensborough CSU lecture, “The Sanity of Christianity,” *Glasgow Evening News*, December 12, 1905.

abolition of Bible teaching from schools, because any such teaching would be doctrinally loaded. He objected strongly to plans for a compulsory state system of non-denominational religious education. His central argument was that religious controversy in schools was unavoidable as long as history was taught in schools; and no attempt to hide behind a fictitious “non-denominational” objectivity. “Those Victorian agnostics, Huxley and Webb, wanted to use the bland formula of ‘Moral Instruction’ to make a comfortable provision for a dying superstition.” In fact, the modern schools of history and secular ethics, he suggested, “taught a doctrine of progress that was more outrageous than the Christian doctrine of the Trinity.” He used a progressive religious history, that misjudged the popular vitality of “both Catholic and Puritan religion” in present day England, to justify allowing an educated elite of “unbelieving Presbyterians and Unitarians inspired by a reverent infidelity” to dictate religious educational policy for the masses. “They are inspired by a reverent infidelity and nothing on earth can be so reverent as infidelity,” became the oft-quoted line from this speech.⁵⁰ Chesterton’s argument that teaching history was inevitably suffused with religious controversy involved him in a radical liberal critique of state involvement in education that seemed to go beyond the liberal demand for the disestablishment. In an article published a year later, “Does Modern Education Enoble?” Chesterton argues that the most valuable moral

⁵⁰ The fullest account of this lecture appears in the *British Weekly*, May, 19, 1904; Also reported at length in *St. Andrew*, May 26, 1904; *Manchester Dispatch*, May 18, 1904; *Morning Post*, May 18, 1904; *Church Bells*, May 27, 1904 [the reporter objected to Chesterton “calling his Majesty’s Ministers at best Agnostics at worst devil worshippers.”]; *Weekly Northern Whig*, June 18, 1904.

lessons are and ought to be taught in the home.⁵¹ The public was unsure what to do with this proposal, although voices from both ends of the religious spectrum endorsed Chesterton's views.⁵²

⁵¹ *Great Thoughts*, November 1905; *English Review*, November 4, 1905 (quotes at length from *Great Thoughts* article); W. J. Hawkey, "Why I believe in Fairy Tales: their educational value," *Evening News*, November 15, 1905; *Book New and Trade Gazette*, December 12, 1905; *Glasgow Evening News*, November 23, 1905 (quotes Chesterton's *Illustrated London News* to similar effect); Robert Lynd, review of J. A. MacCulloch's *Childhood Fiction: A Study of Fairy Tales and Primitive Thought*, *Sunday Sun*, January 28, 1906. Chesterton was invited to speak at the "Fifteenth Annual Conversation" of the National Union of Teachers at Battersea Town Hall, "Can We Teach Without Bias?" He encouraged teachers to teach children that history was a disputative subject; they ought not pretend the part of impartial historian, but teach history as a matter of indifference or as a fanatic.

The Oxbridge universities were founded in the flush of medieval enthusiasm for learning and combining faith and reason; the public schools were founded in the flush of the Renaissance enthusiasm for classical learning and science; but the democratic schools of the Education Act of 1870 were founded in the mere fear that Germans had better school. English state schools had no ideal of republican civitas or human nature to aim for as the French republican lycees had if only in theory now. A school must have this ideal; a teacher must be a fanatic in teaching history.

For the most complete record of this lecture, which reveals it to be a reworking of an earlier article against the formation of an English National Academy to rival the French, appears in *Wandsworth Burrough News*, September 30, 1905; also *Daily News*, September 25, 1905, *Morning Advertiser*, September 25, 1905, *Morning Post*, September 25, 1905, *Glasgow Evening News*, September 25, 1905 (which announced that he would speak on the topic in Scotland in the winter, which may refer to his Armistead lecture, "Shall We Abolish the Inevitable?" given before a "huge audience" in Dundee. *Dundee Courier*, October 3, December 8, December 9, 1905.)

See also, Chesterton, "The Decline of the Amateur Educator," *Black and White*, in 1904-1905 series, "The Creed of a Credulous Person."

By amateur educationist, I mean the being known, for the sake of conversational brevity, as a father or mother...For the parent in this age has been made to feel an amateur.... He is in fact obviously an amateur, for he is an ordinary and private person, without special training or professional concentration, who educates children merely because he has a personal liking that way... He does not make a trade out of his babies... Very often he gives only his spare hours to child-training.

It is too seldom noticed that the word "professional" does not in itself convey the idea of work done for money payment...he puts himself

forward as having a quite special and acquired knowledge of his subject...claims publicly a quite unique training and knowledge.

Now in this struggle between the class of professional educationalists (mainly called teachers, psychologists, dons, and intellectual aunts) and the other class of amateur educationalists (loosely called mothers), I confess my sympathies are entirely with the later...the inheritors of a great human tradition which is far more important than any technical excellence.

⁵² *Free Methodist*, May 18, 1905; *Life of Faith*, May 18, 1905; *Irish Catholic*, May 20, 1905; *Freethinker*, May 21, 1905, *Crusader*, May 25, 1905.

Chapter 5: G. K. Chesterton and the New Theology Movement, 1906-7

Heretics made it clear to some readers that Chesterton was defending liberalism against socialism, but because his understanding of Christianity remained unclear, many embraced him as a representative of the liberal end of the spectrum of Broad Church ethical humanism. Despite Chesterton's adamant argument that non-denominational religious education was impossible, those who approved of his pragmatic defense of belief in *Heretics* hoped that he could be imposed upon to provide a Broad Church philosophy for England (as William James had for America) that could serve as a moral guide for a truly national education system.¹ Chesterton hammered out his allegiance to England's religious tradition as a safeguard for English liberalism in two simultaneous public discussions, one with the leaders of the "New Theology Movement"—R. J. Campbell, Stanton Coit, and G. Bernard Shaw—and one with the Fabian socialists, Shaw (again) and H. G. Wells.

When *Heretics* had appeared in the summer of 1905, Chesterton was still a voice of the party of opposition, but the 1906 Liberal landslide placed him in a new position.

¹ "Advice to Teachers," *Methodist Times*, February 23, 1905, "I do not think any book will help you more as a teacher than James's 'Talks in Physiology and Life's Ideals' (Longman and Co.). As to a book on Browning... G. K. Chesterton's book is by far the most enlightening... Not to read Browning and know his message is a most deplorable loss to any Christian man."

Chesterton's lectures for 1905 include "The Teaching of Patriotism" for the Bradford Teacher's College, "The Practical Importance of Visions" for the Bradford Church Institute, "Religion and Equality" to a Methodist gathering at Hengler's Circus (widely reported because of its unusual setting), and "What is a Nation?" for a men's meeting at Whitefield's London mission.

The election had been won on the issues of free trade, disestablishment of religious education, and temperance reform and there was a feeling of exhilaration and possibility in the ranks of Liberals. A number of Liberal journalists had won seats in Parliament, including Chesterton's friends, C. F. G. Masterman and Hilaire Belloc. Chesterton campaigned for his friends, but he remained a journalist and writer and soon found himself called upon to serve the Liberal program in a literary capacity.²

The new Liberal government immediately introduced an Education Bill to redress Nonconformist grievances and the topic of religious freedom in education came even more to the fore. The Liberals passed their religious education bill in Commons, but Conservatives and Anglican bishops in the Lords amended it beyond all recognition. Outraged that the "unrepresentative assembly" had dared to undermine a bill "which the country demanded in unmistakable terms at the general election," the Liberals rejected the amendments *en bloc* in December, the first of a series of clashes that led to the constitutional crisis in 1909-11.³

With the issue of state-funded religious education hanging in the air, R. J. Campbell, the Congregationalist pastor of London's City Temple began gather around

² Chesterton was a member of the Eighty Club, a group of speakers available for speaking on behalf of Liberal candidates (perhaps they sponsored his winter 1905 lecture tour in Scotland?), *Daily News*, December 29, 1905. He gave lectures for the League of Young Liberals at the National Liberal Club for C.F.G.Masterman, Belloc, and Noel Buxton (announced *Daily News*, November 25, 30 1905; *Daily Chronicle*, etc.) and a speech on "Liberal Watchwords" for the New Century Dinner at the New Reform Club with Shaw in the chair—"an overflow meeting," a crowd "waited two hours to hear the speaker," *Tribune*, February 3, 1906. The *Clarion* suggested that the *Daily News* put Chesterton in charge of the Fleet Street magic-lantern show for thousands of voters, A. Neil Lyons, *Clarion*, January 27, 1906.

³ Peter Rowland, *The Last Liberal Governments: The Promised Land, 1905-1910* (London, 1968). Rowland quotes Birrell and Campbell-Bannerman. 82-88.

him a group of pastors, writers, and speakers for the purpose of defining a “New Theology” that might serve the purpose of nondenominational ethical teaching in schools. Dr. Clifford, the Baptist minister who had led the Nonconformist protest against the 1902 Education Act, also expressed his sympathy for the “New Theology movement.”⁴ Gathering support from across the religious spectrum, the “New Theologians” looked to Chesterton.⁵ “[A] liberal Catholic like Father Tyrell or Mr. G. K. Chesterton should show us how easily, with a little reinterpretation of the Creeds, most of what the [New Theology] teaches could be accepted without any violence being done to traditional expressions of orthodoxy.”⁶ Stanton Coit, an American minister who founded the Moral Instruction League and the British Union of Ethical Societies, also identified Chesterton as one of the most promising candidates for the task of formulating a new nondenominational identity for the nation. Chesterton and Shaw, he said, seemed able to “appropriate the words orthodoxy, religion, theism, theology, and divine for their

⁴ *Tablet*, March 2, 1907.

⁵ *Country Life*, June 29, 1907. The article compares Shaw and Chesterton to Carlyle, Ruskin, and Arnold as prophets of the age. It calls to mind how Chesterton had once contrasted, one of his Bookman articles, Thomas Carlyle and Mathew Arnold as prophet and priest of the Victorian age: “Carlyle rebuked the English for not being English enough, like a trainer to a prize-fighter. Arnold rebuked the English for being too English, like a chaplain to a criminal.” The nation needed a positive program: how could the English go about being more English. Now, after the 1906 victory, the Liberal literary and political establishment called even more urgently on Chesterton to be neither prophet nor priest, but visionary poet of the liberal future of England.

⁶ *Morning Leader*, February 26, 1907.

naturalistic morality.”⁷ Thus, to initiate the movement, Campbell invited Shaw and Chesterton to speak at City Temple.

Shaw delivered two lectures, “The Religion of the British Empire” in 1906 and “The New Theology” in 1907. He opened with an echo of Chesterton’s argument in *Heretics*: “My first proposition is that you can’t have an Empire without a religion, and my next that if the Empire is to be a real thing all the people in it must believe the same truth—though it does not matter what legends they accept or what imagery they use.” Each citizen needed to recognize that they were in the hands of a “higher power” and to leave off clinging to their “miserable individual lives” in order to be “really effective men in the Empire.”⁸ He therefore proposed that ethical teaching focus on the unfolding history of the “Life Force” or the “evolutionary process.” “Evolution is the vital part of

⁷ Report of Stanton Coit’s lecture, “Shaw, Chesterton, and Angels,” *Ethics*, July 15, 1907. Coit could have gotten this idea from some of Chesterton’s early lectures. See “‘G.K.C.’ on Ceremonial,” *Daily News*, March 20, 1903 (report of lecture at Hanover Chapel, Peckham, on “Advantages of Ceremonial,” where Chesterton argued that England’s ceremonial was “at a low ebb in this century and country,” but that if she had a revolution it would revive. “Ceremonial breaks out at great spiritual crises... in the French Revolution for example.” (Chesterton may have been lecturing from an article published earlier, see “The Weakness of Full-Dress Emotions,” *Glasgow Herald*, January 24, 1903.)

Also “The Ethical Movement,” *Daily News*, February 23, 1903. Chesterton lectured to the Ethical Union on “Dogma and being Dogmatic,” saying that it was silly for ethical societies to quibble over differences with churches when faced with profound skepticism. He declared his dogmas to be the Equality of Man and sanctity of individual life or right to live and most vociferously opposed the dogma of physical evolution and Darwinian theory.

⁸ November 22, 1906. *Religious Speeches of Bernard Shaw*, Warren Sylvester Smith ed. (Pennsylvania, 1963). 1-8. A few days later Shaw repeated the lecture for the Christian socialists of Headlam’s Guild of St. Matthew; “Some Necessary Repairs to Religion,” *Times*, November 30.

the New Theology” that would replace the “old theology that came back to the old tribal god, Jehovah,” the “old-fashioned conception of God the Designer.” Shaw insisted that his religion of evolution was “no idle heresy or paradox of my own,” but was contained in the “actual articles of the Church of England.”⁹

Chesterton replied that determining where the New Theologians stood in relation to the actual doctrines of English Christianity was not easy, but that he heard in Shaw’s talk of a an evolutionary force making for the creation of a race of Supermen the voice of a new aristocracy, not merely a reaffirmation of the old English democratic ideal under new and more ecumenical religious trappings.¹⁰ He suspected, as most of the New

⁹ *Christian Commonwealth*, May 23, 30, 1907. G. K. Chesterton, “Shaw and His Christian Critics,” *Illustrated London News*, December 29, 1906.

There seems to be a great fuss being made about the speech on religion which Mr. Bernard Shaw delivered . . . The Bishop of London and Father Vaughan and other distinguished clerics have written letter and delivered sermons expressing indignation and apparently astonishment at Mr. Bernard Shaw attacking Christianity . . . If he had attacked Christianity there would have been no more cause for excitement than if Mr. Foote or Mr. J. M. Robertson had attacked it. But there was cause for excitement when a man whom everybody regarded as an Atheist came to a Church society and declared that the only good of life was to do the will of God, and that the one thing the world must never let go was the idea of the Incarnate Deity . . . The Bishops seem to me to know nothing of what is going on.

The Bishop of London had demanded and received a repudiation of Shaw’s “New Theology” as “in contradiction to the Christian faith” from Headlam. *Religious Speeches of Bernard Shaw*, Warren Sylvester Smith ed. (Pennsylvania, 1963), 9.

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, “The New Theology and Modern Thought,” *Illustrated London News*, March 23, 1907. [Obviously I would like to quote some report of Chesterton’s speech; for now, this section is taken from writings on the New Theology Movement from the same year.]

Theologians supported imperialism during the Anglo-Boer War, that their proposed new state religion was merely “an apologetics for power.”¹¹

Chesterton therefore considered disestablishment of the Anglican Church even more urgent in light of the talk of a New Theology and more rigorously controlled State Church. He argued that the New Theologians’ idea of the governing class as the religious leadership and professoriate for the nation was un-Christian and un-English. They derived “the idea of the governing class as a grave body which educates the nation, pouring upon it a sort of paternal culture” from the German conception of the state as the fountainhead of national identity.

Our aristocracy has quite as much power—it has more political power; but there has never been in it this educational notion; to my English instinct it appears priggish. The rich are as much our masters, but they are not so much our schoolmasters. To my feeling there is something even unchristian about such solemnity in an earthly hierarchy. Christianity has permitted aristocracy, but it has never permitted aristocracy to be taken seriously. It is Brahminism to take aristocracy seriously. And I do feel that it is a great merit in the English aristocracy that it cannot possibly be taken seriously.¹²

He was not willing, as the New Theologians apparently hoped, to replace the current English aristocracy with a such a new aristocracy, even if he was to be their visionary leader.¹³ He saw the best hope for the revival of English Christianity and the moral unification of the nation in disestablishment.

¹¹ G. K. Chesterton, letter to the editor, *Tribune*, January 19, 1907.

¹² G. K. Chesterton, “On Hating Germany and Other Nations,” *ILN*, November 3, 1906. (The entire article would bear quoting).

¹³ It was not easy for him to convince the Fabians of his genuine disagreement: see A. R. Orage, *New Age*, February 25, 1909.

There is a tendency in certain Socialist circles to worship the expert and the specialist: it is a dangerous tendency. But Mr. Chesterton

He believed himself, in arguing for disestablishment, to be part of a broad-based English religious movement. He thought that it was particularly difficult to read English religious identity, but he believed that there was a unifying tendency afoot. "Our position in England has been singularly perplexed by the fact that there has been in this country a Catholic Theology, a Calvinistic Theology that rebelled against it, and an Evangelical Theology that rebelled against that."¹⁴ Nevertheless, he considered the nineteenth-century evangelical revivals and growth of Anglo-Catholicism to be a sign of English Christianity's drawing new life from its radical roots. Britain's religious establishment isolated Roman Catholicism as the other, but as dissent from the state church grew, he argued, the Catholicism occupied a less isolated position. As the state became more secular despite its established church, Christians aligned themselves in opposition to the state and its church.

He called the tendency the "English Catholic Movement," because he believed the movement away from established religion was an expression of popular religious feeling

mistakes a tendency for a necessity; he conceives bureaucracy as involved in Socialism, whereas I believe the movement will shed its reverence in a very little while . . . I know this tendency is confined practically to the Fabian Society, and even there within narrow limits; and that it is intensely unpopular outside of London.

Mr. Chesterton would not object, presumably, to a bureaucracy subject to popular consent . . . Vigilance would be easier to exercise over a bureaucracy than over an oligarchy. For one thing, it lacks the charm of manners that lulls the sense of liberty; neither has it any native attractiveness . . . On the whole, even Mr. Chesterton would rather lead a popular attack on, let us say, a Eugenist Health Department than on the House of Lords.

¹⁴ G. K. Chesterton, "The New Theology and Modern Thought," *Illustrated London News*, March 23, 1907.

rather than a theological movement limited to academic circles.¹⁵ “I don’t like the term Oxford Movement,” Chesterton said in an interview, “for the thing was going on all over the place. The meaning of the last thirty years is that everybody—Churchmen, Nonconformists, Baptists, and Unitarians—have been sucked closer to Rome. Peg out on your mental map the contour of thought say ten years ago—and you will find that in the interval it has swept towards Catholicism.”¹⁶ English people of various religious denominations were beginning to imagine an end to Britain’s religious establishment.

The New Theologians had a very different vision as Stanton Coit made clear in his book, *National Idealism and the State Church*.¹⁷ He laid out a plan for the formation

¹⁵ Chesterton, letter to the editor, *Nation*, December 7, 1907. This lengthy letter to the editor was part of the discussion of the relationship between the New Theology (or “modernist” theology) and the theology of the original Oxford Movement going on in the pages of the *Nation* (formerly the *Speaker*). A number of writers thought that Newman’s “Essay on Development” opened Catholic theology to historicism and pragmatism (“not with Professor James’s pragmatism, but with that kind that befits a Catholic thinker”); letters to the editor, *Nation*, December 14, 28 1907.

Chesterton disagreed. “We are quite willing to develop Liberalism, but hang it all, there is some Liberalism to develop . . . A man who is always going back and picking his first principles to pieces may be having an amusing time, but he is not developing as Newman meant development. Newman meant that if you wanted a tree to grow you must plant it finally in some definite spot . . . When the flowers break forth again, the new epics and new arts, they will break out on the ancient and living tree. They cannot break out upon the little shrubs that you are always pulling up by the roots to see how they are growing.” Letter to the editor, *Nation* December 21, 1907. Also letter to the editor agreeing with Chesterton on the pragmatic necessity of creeds for “the man in the street.” *Nation*, January 11, 1908.

This discussion raised further questions about whether Chesterton had become a Roman Catholic. *Nation*, December 7, 1907 and *Irish News* December 17, 1907.

¹⁶ Interview by P.W.W., *Daily News*, December 13, 1907.

¹⁷ Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church: A Constructive Essay in Religion* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1907). Coit dedicated the book to John Seeley, the author of *Natural Religion* and *The Expansion of England*.

of a nondenominational British state church based on socialism and “ethical idealism,” and he insisted that a literary and cultural elite was needed who could disseminate this vision to the nation. “The two men of our time pre-eminently suited, in taste, temperament, ability, and enthusiasm, to become servants of the Church-that-is-to-be are Mr. Chesterton and Mr. Shaw.”¹⁸

Coit recognized certain parallels between his own secular humanism and the “new humanism” William James proposed for the English-speaking peoples in *Varieties of Religious Experience*. Coit was therefore eager to present his state idealism as a rival to James’s pluralistic idealism, which he thought was too individualistic and liberal and too little concerned with the coherence of society. Reviewers complained that Coit devoted a disproportionate amount of space to attacking James’s “pluralistic idealism,” but Coit was concerned that “the wide popularity of Professor James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience*,” in which “he begins his investigation of ‘personal religion’ only after setting aside churches and all their works as irrelevant” would fix in the public’s mind the idea that “the psychology of religious experience . . . and the nature of the religious life is necessarily individualistic.”¹⁹ Coit defended the tradition of T. H. Green’s Hegelian “monistic” idealism, popular in British ethical societies and academic philosophical circles, against James’s liberalizing tendencies. He wanted was a strong state-church system, stripped of supernatural belief, that could effect a religious revival in the nation: “A revival is an organization of good influences and agencies so as to bring them to bear

¹⁸ Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church* (1907), 142-143.

¹⁹ Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church* (1907), 14 (the entire first chapter deals with James, “Church Discipline and Personal Religion”). For reviews of Coit’s book, *Methodist Times* January 9, 1908; *Glasgow Herald*, December 27, 1907.

with their full force upon the character of the individual members of the community. Conversion is the surrender of the individual to those forces.”²⁰

Coit’s idea of a state church based on purely ethical principles elaborated on Blatchford’s attempt to unite the secularist and socialist movements. The new government raised hopes of disestablishment of Anglicanism in education, and, while Nonconformists pushed for state-funded nondenominational Christianity to be taught in schools, Coit envisioned an opportunity for “establishing” secularism. “State schools in the interests of the people is the cry of the socialist party . . . But the day will surely come when socialists, prompted by the principle as yet half unconsciously regulating their programme will realise that the supreme sphere of activity for the State is religion.”²¹

The real organic unit of religious life, of which any man is a member is always the nation to which he belongs, in so far as the nation stands for social and personal ideals and principles . . . The nation in its capacity as standard-bearer of the ideal may be more or less organized . . . The party or school which regards the nation, in so far as it upholds standards of manhood, as the church, calls itself the Broad Church party . . . The State is the nation organized and acting with sovereign power through its government. Accordingly, when fully organized a National Church becomes a State Church.²²

The State Church would educate the working class, and “the intellectual class would become leaders in the new movement within the Church for its nationalization.”²³

²⁰ Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church* (1907), 16.

²¹ Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church* (1907).

²² Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church* (1907), 27, 30, 36.

²³ Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church* (1907), 34.

Coit dedicated his plan for a renewed State Church to the memory of John Seeley, whose book *Natural Religion* inspired him. Coit saw his idea that “the real organic unit of religious life, of which any man is a member, is always the nation to which he belongs, in so far as the nation stands for social and personal ideals” as the fruit of a particularly English tradition of thought, running through Samuel Coleridge, Thomas Arnold, James Martineau, and John Stuart Mill. Coit read *Heretics* as a sign of Chesterton’s place in this tradition because of Chesterton’s idea of the nation as “standard-bearer of the ideal.”²⁴

Coit therefore called on Chesterton, along with Kipling, Shaw, Israel Zangwill, to form a committee to initiate the new socialist State Church. They could begin by revising the Book of Common Prayer and transforming Anglican liturgy into a secular patriotic service. Coit’s idea was nothing if not ambitious:

When once the historic manual has been transformed by discarding every vestige of anti-democratic prejudice and trust in personal agencies outside the social organism itself and fresh material and new rites have been introduced to meet present day rites and exigencies, an instrument of religious propaganda will have been acquired which though still Christian in origin and spirit, will have outgrown the provincialism of its source and history.²⁵

Coit relied especially on Chesterton’s ability to strip England’s national rituals of Christian references, history, and provincialism while retaining something recognizably “English.” He believed that Chesterton’s “book on *Heretics* would justify the Church offering him an annuity of a thousand pounds for the rest of his life and giving him free hand to do his best towards providing a ritual English in spirit, English in form, English

²⁴ Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church* (1907), 30-36.

²⁵ Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church* (1907), 74.

in origin and human in sympathy.”²⁶ Coit believed Chesterton to be representative of the English, socialist end of the “new humanism,” with William James representing the American and liberal alternative.

Chesterton, however, replying to Coit’s suggestion in an article in the *Nation*, not only protested the obvious difficulty of reducing theological terms to wholly symbolic figures and using “the terms of supernatural religion in the sense of ethics,” but criticized the idea of “a purely secular and social religion, of the nation and a religious unit, of all sections joining in worship without reference to theology” as itself “un-English.”²⁷ In reply to Coit’s attempt to provide a history of the peculiar English tendency towards a national religious establishment Chesterton outlined his vision of England’s religious history. He emphasized the long history of an English church free from any established relation to the state stretching back before the Protestant Reformation. Placing the formation of the English nation long before the period of Tudor state-building, Chesterton saw England’s national identity interwoven with the Christian tradition as an essentially liberal rather than establishment religion. In fact, pointing back to the origins of England as a Roman province, he argues that England’s identity was formed precisely in reaction to the idea of the state as church.

There is in us a memory of the history of our race. Christianity was not an expedient tried in the barbarous twilight of history; it was an expedient

²⁶ Stanton Coit, *National Idealism and the State Church* (1907), 143.

²⁷ G. K. Chesterton, “An Agnostic Establishment,” *Nation*, May 16, 1908. Chesterton’s review was quoted approvingly in the *Inquirer*, May 23, 1908: “When Mr. Chesterton writes like this we think of him as not merely the amusing paradoxical optimist but as a force making for veracity and for religion.”

tried after the sun of rationalism had both risen and set. It was an expedient tried after Dr. Coit's expedient had been tried—and found wanting. For the true name of this civic religion without dogma is simply Paganism. It is needless to discuss whether it can exist: it has existed. Men have worshipped the virtues as pure pillars of the State; they did it in ancient Rome. Men have worshipped a god who was simply public unity and equity—his name was Divus Caesar. And we modern Europeans are not so much men moving towards that experience as men fleeing from it; we are the advance guard of that immense revolt and rout which fled from the failure of the Pagan Empire.²⁸

Chesterton reacted into a more determined anti-establishment position Coit's proposed State Church made him question whether any Christian could belong to an established church.²⁹

Chesterton elaborated the idea of England formed from a Christian and liberal reaction to the Roman religious state in a poem he published at this time—a fragment of what would later become his greatest poetic effort, *The Ballad of the White Horse*, an epic of Alfred the Great. The poem opens with the idea that the English tradition can only be understood as the Christian aftermath of Roman civilization.

The end of the world was long ago,
 When the ends of the world waxed free,
 When Rome was sunk in a waste of slaves,
 And the sun drowned in the sea.
 When Caesar's sun fell out of the sky
 And whoso harkened right
 Could only hear the plunging
 Of the nation in the night.³⁰

²⁸ G. K. Chesterton, "An Agnostic Establishment," *Nation*, May 16, 1908.

²⁹ Failing to gain Chesterton to the cause, Coit attempted it himself, *National Idealism and the Book of Common Prayer: An Essay in Re-Interpretation and Revision* (London, 1908), and eventually, failing to gain support in England he returned to America and tried his program there, *The Soul of America: A Constructive Essay in the Sociology of Religion* (New York, 1914) [in which he again found the "anti-nationalism of the Church of Rome to be the main obstacle, "You can be a Catholic, but you cannot be a Roman Catholic and at the same time be in spiritual life a true and loyal American."]

Chesterton later developed his idea of a historic liberal-Christian England into a full-fledged idiosyncratic version of Whig history. He began to envision England in these terms during the years immediately after the 1906 Liberal victory in reaction to calls from Coit and others to form a political-religious vision for England.

The socialists did not however give up all hope of winning Chesterton to the cause. In the midst of discussions of Coit's book and Campbell's "New Theology," the Fabian *New Age* ran a discussion between Wells, Shaw, Chesterton, and Belloc that circles around the possibilities of such an alliance. Wells believed Belloc and Chesterton could be won over to socialism; Shaw disagreed.

Wells argued that "their organized Christian State is nearer the organized State I want than our present plutocracy," and insisted that "differ as we may, Belloc and Chesterton are with all Socialists in being on the same side of the great political and social cleavage that opens at the present time."³¹ If the socialists could prevail on Chesterton and Belloc to provide some constructive program of reform, or even some literary expression of their idea of an English utopia comparable to those of Wells and Shaw, the alliance would be apparent to all. "What are Chesterton and Belloc doing? If our ideal is partly right and partly wrong, are they trying to build up a better ideal? Will

³⁰ Chesterton, *The Ballad of the White Horse* (1911); "Fragment from a Ballad Epic of Alfred," *Albany Review*, 1907.

Later, after his conversion to Roman Catholicism, he took Thomas More as the prototypical Englishman because of his defense of the independence of the church from the state.

³¹ H. G. Wells, "About Chesterton and Belloc," *New Age*, January 11, 1908.

they state a Utopia and how they propose it shall be managed?" Wells thought that perhaps Belloc's cynical cast of mind might incapacitate him for the task, but he was certain that the poetic quality of Chesterton's thought made him the foremost candidate for the position of visionary in the progressive English state. Wells was eager therefore to win Chesterton from the influence of Belloc. "Chesterton isn't a Socialist—agreed! But between us and the master of Elibank or Sir Hugh Bell or any other Free Trade Liberal capitalist or landlord, which side is he on . . . I want [a Utopia] from Chesterton. Purely unhelpful criticism isn't enough for a man of his size. It isn't fair for him to go about sitting on other people's Utopias."³²

Shaw agreed that "Wells's challenge to Chesterton is finally irresistible: he must plank down his Utopia against ours," but Shaw disagreed that Chesterton was on the verge of an alliance with the socialists.³³ Wells was mistaken, he thought, in thinking that Chesterton advocated some form of "organized Christian state." Wells's "desire to embrace Chesterton as a vessel of the Goodwill that is making for Socialism is a hopeless one." Shaw thought Belloc more likely to propose some form of Christian socialist state, but "Chesterton and Belloc are not the same sort of Christian, not the same sort of pagan, not the same sort of Liberal, not the same sort of anything intellectual." Chesterton was an old liberal radical and appealed to a mythical liberal Englishness that was essentially anti-utopian. If Chesterton put forward a utopia for England he would appeal to this myth

³² H. G. Wells, "About Chesterton and Belloc," *New Age*, January 11, 1908.

³³ G. B. Shaw, "Belloc and Chesterton," *New Age*, February 15, 1908.

and idealize “an orgy of uproarious drunkards—a perpetual carouse of Shakespeares and Ben Johnsons at the Mermaid.”³⁴

Shaw therefore did not attempt to win Chesterton for socialism, but instead looked to undermine Chesterton’s claim to speak for England. For this purpose, Shaw created the image of “the Chesterbelloc,” a theatrical monster with “Hilaire hindlegs” and “Gilbert forelegs.” “Chesterton is to be a roaring jovial Englishman, not taking his pleasures sadly.” “Belloc is to be a Frenchman . . . a French peasant, greedy, narrow, individualistic, ready to fight like a rat in a corner for his scrap of land, and above all, intensely and superstitiously Catholic. And the two together are to impose on the simple bourgeoisie of England as the Main Forces of European Civilization.” The Chesterbelloc represents England as the offspring of a long European tradition of liberalism, but, Shaw says, when he dissected this make-believe monster and examined its parts, the reality would become clear. He would uncover the fact that Chesterton and Belloc were neither of them true Englishmen and had no right to define Englishness. He proclaimed Chesterton a Frenchman in disguise, despite his cockney upbringing and his Dickensian journalism, and Belloc an Irishman, despite his Oxford degree and seat in Parliament.

Wells is an Englishman and cannot understand these foreigners. The pages of *Who's Who* explain the whole misunderstanding. Turn to Wells, Herbert Geo., and you learn at once that he is every inch an Englishman, a man of Kent . . . It is nothing to Wells that he is one of the foremost authors of his time: he takes at once the stronger English ground that he is by blood a Kentish cricketer.

Now we turn to Chesterton, Gilbert Keith. He is the son of his mother, and his mother’s name is Marie Louise Grosjean. Who his father was will never matter to anyone who has once seen G. K. Chesterton . . . If ever a Grosjean lived and wrote his name on the sky by towering before it, that man is G.K.C. France did not break the mould in which she formed

³⁴ G. B. Shaw, “Belloc and Chesterton,” *New Age*, February 15, 1908.

Rabelais. It got to Campden Hill in the year 1874; and it never turned out a more complete Frenchman than it did then.

Let us look up Belloc. The place of his birth is suppressed, probably because it was in some very English place; for Belloc is desperately determined not to be an Englishman . . . You cannot say Belloc is wholly French except by personal choice; but still he is not English. Beside his friend Grosjean he seems Irish. I suspect him of being Irish. Anyhow, not English, and therefore forever incomprehensible to Wells.³⁵

Shaw's point was that the Chesterbelloc was a fake, that the European England that they combine to create—at once liberal and Catholic—is a myth of monstrous proportions.

Belloc and Chesterton responded rather differently to Shaw's criticism. Belloc dismissed their desire for some utopian ideal behind which to unite the nation. He argued that national unity and patriotic identification derived from the tradition of Roman republicanism embedded in European cultural history. One strain of eighteenth and nineteenth-century liberalism rejected this heritage of local patriotism as incompatible with humanitarian idealism, but Belloc thought that "the modern insistence upon transformation and general unity is just a bit of academic disassociation from life and, pushed to the point to which it has been pushed, a disease." In the end, he said, this brand of liberalism left thinkers like Shaw and Wells open to ideas of a British racial unity that Belloc considered more mythical than his own idea of the unity of European culture:

The tupenny ha-penny Donnish way of talking, now pretty fairly mildewed, was to talk about the British and the 'Aryan' race. It does not form a real part of a real history. We have no proof of the existence of an 'Aryan' race. It does not form a real part of a real history. We do know all about a real historical phenomenon called european civilization; we are

³⁵ G. B. Shaw, "Belloc and Chesterton," *New Age*, February 15, 1908.

acquainted with its corporate tradition; we who belong to it feel its religion in our blood; its military qualities are native to us.³⁶

Belloc argued that the memory of the “corporate traditions” of the Roman Empire would better sustain English national unity better than vague hopes for the future evolution of an efficient socialist empire.

Chesterton was less interested than Belloc in defining English patriotism or patriotism in general as the product of an enclosed European cultural tradition. Local identity and patriotism, he said, was one form of the natural virtue of *pietas* and could not be definitively attributed to any one culture. Patriotism, like religion, was a subcategory of the virtue of justice. Men naturally acknowledge an unlimited debt of loyalty to God, family, and local community and this primary sense of unbounded indebtedness was the only seed that could grow and develop into a humanistic respect for mankind. Shaw had tried to put a wedge between Belloc and Chesterton because of differences of temperament or literary style, but Chesterton believed that their mutual sense of *pietas* cut across their temperamental differences. “We do not ‘plank down’ a Utopia,” he said, because Utopian visions and desires for an all-powerful reforming state developed out of a contempt for mankind as it was. Shaw “fiercely” and Wells “gently” scorned mankind. Belloc “fiercely” and he “gently” respected mankind. The contrast between Belloc’s “harsh and academic” style and his own “vague and mystical” style, should not therefore

³⁶ Belloc, *New Age*, February 8, 1908. “Religion in our blood” is an interesting phrase; without identifying Jews racially, Belloc definitely excluded them as “foreigners” from European Christendom.

Like Belloc, Chesterton rebuffed Shaw’s attempt to define Englishness racially, refusing to be sidetracked into “the question of whether my maternal great grand-mother having come from Switzerland unfits me to be a member of this nation.”

mislead readers.³⁷ Chesterton declared he had no fellow-feeling with “Shaw and his socialists,” who “have no sympathy; they do not feel with ordinary men about ordinary things.” Chesterton took up Shaw’s complaint that he tended to idealize the English drunkard and his “darling vices,” and said “Belloc and I are not maintaining that beer is a divine glory, but that it is a normal habit and a natural right; as normal as meat, and much more normal than soap.”³⁸ Chesterton claimed beer as the symbol of English liberty, but he insisted that it was simply the Englishman’s share in a natural human liberty.

Responding, Shaw complained that like the jingo imperialist press claiming to speak for all Englishmen,

Chesterton never says, ‘I, a hybrid Superman, and Grand Transmogrifier of Ideas, desire this believe that, deny the other.’ He always says that the English people desires it; that the dumb democracy which have never yet spoken (save through the mouth of the Chesterbelloc) believes it; or that the principles of Liberalism and the French Revolution repudiate it. Read his poem in the *Neolith* on the dumb democracy of England: it would be a great poem if it were not such fearful nonsense . . . To set yourself against the Chesterbelloc is not merely to be unpatriotic, like setting yourself against the *Daily Mail* or the *Daily Express*: it is to set yourself against all the forces, active and latent (especially latent) of humanity.³⁹

³⁷ G. K. Chesterton, “On Wells and a glass of beer,” *New Age*, January 25, 1908.

³⁸ G. K. Chesterton, “The Last of the Rationalists (A reply to Mr. Bernard Shaw),” *New Age*, February 29, 1908, 348-340.

³⁹ G. B. Shaw, *New Age*, January, 11, 1908. The last verse of the poem Shaw refers to, “The Secret People,” runs:

We hear men speaking for us of new laws strong and sweet,
 Yet is there no man speaketh as we speak in the street.
 It may be we shall rise the last as Frenchmen rose the first,
 Our wrath come after Russia’s wrath and our wrath be the worst.
 It may be we are meant to mark with our riot and our rest
 God’s scorn for all men governing. It may be beer is best.
 But we are the people of England; and we have not spoken yet.
 Smile at us, pay us, pass us. But do not quite forget.

Chesterton replied with more of the same—“Shaw and Wells are two men of genius. Chesterton and Belloc is mankind”—and various papers reprinted his responses with approval.⁴⁰ and one writer complained, “Shaw tells us that Chesterton is the descendent of Gargantua. Doubtless: but what about Falstaff? Does not the Falstaff-Gargantua element bring to the British character quite as much as the Sidney Webb/Bernard Shaw element?”⁴¹ “There is no doubt that the average Englishman, as Mr. G. K. Chesterton has recently shown, regards Beer as in some way a symbol of Liberty. A mug of beer might very well, in fact, stand as one of the insignia of the royal house of British democracy.”⁴²

Together, the “New Theology” and *New Age* debates with Coit, Wells, and Shaw, gained Chesterton greater notoriety as the voice of Liberal and Christian England, and increased the general sense of expectation about what his version of a religious “orthodoxy” for England would look like if he would provide one.⁴³

⁴⁰ The “Chesterbelloc” exchange in the *New Age* was reported and commented on in the *Leicester Post*, *Morning Advocate*, *Pall Mall Gazette*, February 28, 1908; *British Weekly*, March 6, 1908.

⁴¹ A. H. Lee, letter to the editor, *New Age*, February 22, 1908.. See also letter to the editor, *New Age*, March 11, 1909, exclaiming that “Mr. Chesterton solemnly assures his readers (in the *Daily News* of all papers!) that ‘the perpetuation of such Englishmen as Pickwick and Sam Weller is now the only vital issue in England.’ [The Liberal government’s Temperance Bill was before Commons and the *Daily News*, under Cadbury’s ownership, was a leading temperance paper.]; *Manchester Guardian*, April 12, 1909, reviewing Edward Emerson’s *Beverages past and Present*: “Why were not Belloc and Chesterton cited as witnesses to the glory of beer? ... Why too the mitigated French word ‘beverage’ in place of the homlier and director Saxon ‘drink’?”

⁴² *New Age*, April 4, 1908.

⁴³ For example, this exchange seems to have led to a debate on socialism between Chesterton and J. Ramsay MacDonald, MP in Caxton Hall, under auspices of Christian

Social Union presided over by Scott Holland. Reported in *Morning Leader, Daily Chronicle*, November 14, 1908.

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Part III. Introduction: G. K. Chesterton's variation on Whig history

Chesterton is not often considered in the role of public historian in his own right. His earliest biographer, Maisie Ward, set the pace when she implied that Chesterton's historical vision was borrowed wholesale from his friend Hilaire Belloc.¹ Since then, historians have assumed that "it was Hilaire Belloc who furnished the *idees generales*, historical and sociological, for Chesterton's populism" and have elided Chesterton's history with Belloc's radical rejection of the Whig narrative of English history.²

¹ While "in pure literature, philosophy and theology" Chesterton "remained untouched" by his friendship with Hilaire Belloc, Ward writes, "in politics, sociology, and history (and the relation of religion to all three), it is different." Maisie Ward, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (1943), 115.

² Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill: Private Scholars, Public Culture, and the Crisis of British Liberalism, 1900-1939* (1996). Feske, for example, does not deal with Chesterton directly, and he does not even distinguish between Gilbert Chesterton and his brother Cecil, who collaborated with Belloc in writing the *Servile State*, 33. See also, J. H. Grainger, *Patriotisms: Britain, 1900-1939* (London, 1986), Chapter 7, "Rash Political Indignation." 104-123.

W. H. Auden, writing about Chesterton in the 1940s echoes Maisie Ward by dismissing his historical writing as an appendage of Belloc's historical *work*. "Chesterton was not himself an historian, but he had both the gift and position to make known to a general public the views of historians, like Belloc, who were challenging the Whig version of English history and the humanists version of cultural history." Auden continued:

Our school textbooks taught us that, once the papist-inclined and would-be tyrants, the Stuarts, had been got rid of, and the Protestant Succession assured, the road to Freedom, Democracy and Progress lay wide open; they also taught us that the civilization which ended with the fall of the Roman Empire was re-born in the sixteenth century, between which dates lay twelve centuries of barbarism, superstition, and fanaticism. If today every informed person knows both accounts to be untrue, that the political result of the Glorious Revolution of 1688 was to hand over the government of the country to a small group of plutocrats, a state of affairs that persisted until 1914, perhaps even until 1939 . . . Chesterton is not the least among those persons who are responsible for this change of view. [Chesterton's Non-Fictional Prose, ed. Auden]

According to this conventional view, Chesterton's history belongs in a "radically disaffected, overtly reactionary strand in the English approach to the past." "[F]rom Southey and Cobbett, Pugin and Disraeli, to Ruskin and Morris, with a twentieth-century epilogue in Belloc and Chesterton and, more soberly, Tawney, the past, constantly called on for the conception of a medieval utopia, notoriously formed the basis of a radical critique of capitalism and a repudiation of Whiggish complacency about the national history."³

It is a mistake to subsume Chesterton's historical vision under Belloc's in this way. Chesterton's vision of English history, in fact, contributed greatly to the apotheosis of a whiggish narrative as national history in the interwar period.⁴ Despite the influence of Belloc's rejection of Britain's triumphalist history, Chesterton as a historian of England belongs with the twentieth-century Whigs—the Hammonds, Trevelyan, and Churchill—who "produced historiographic compromises that mingled elements of old and new."⁵ Chesterton's work is perhaps most similar in spirit to that of the Hammonds, who attempted to replace the "narrative of uninterrupted advancement" with "a more complex and problematic, though still essentially progressive, mosaic of sin and redemption" in which "the grievous errors and dead ends of the Industrial Revolution

³ Burrow, *Liberal Descent: Victorian Historians and the English Past* (1981), 240-241.

⁴ "The acceptance of Whig history as the "national interpretation" occurred between the wars, not by the end of the nineteenth century as Butterfield, Burrow, and Collini have alleged." Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996); Butterfield, *The Englishman and His History*; Burrow, *Liberal Descent*, 286-301; Collini, *Public Moralists*, 338, 346-51.

⁵ Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill*, 60.

would share the foreground with Whig history's more familiar glorious episodes.'⁶ Chesterton wrote England's history as a comedy rather than tragedy, even if it was at times a rather desperate comedy. But Chesterton's rhetorical abilities and continuous connection with a popular audience place him beyond the Hammonds, nearer to Churchill, as a contributor to a national historical consensus in the first half of the twentieth century. Chesterton's two greatest attempts to re-write English history for a popular audience were poetic, re-constructive efforts rather than critical pieces. *The Ballad of the White Horse* (1911), his epic poem of Alfred the Great's battle against the Danes, and *A Short History of England* (1917) reveal Chesterton's desire to sustain the Whig Liberal "confidence in the possession of the past" even while he struggled against the progressive narrative of state and empire-building that it had come to serve.

The extent and importance of Belloc's influence on Chesterton must be acknowledged, of course, but in the broad strokes (and Chesterton wrote almost entirely in broad strokes), Chesterton drew on other sources for his vision of England's past and England's historical development. Chesterton was raised a Gladstonian Liberal, educated into a strong sense of the poetry and patriotism of Whig history. His first and most influential reworking of the Whig narrative came when his wife, Frances, brought him into contact with the Anglo-Catholic movement. The Anglo-Catholic movement was essentially a reinterpretation of English religious history and identity. A radically counter-cultural movement in the mid-nineteenth century, Anglo-Catholicism became increasingly socially acceptable by the turn of the twentieth century. Although Anglo-

⁶ Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill*, 12.

Catholics often conceded to medievalists and Tory Radicals that the Reformation signified a break with the socio-economic traditions of England's Catholic past, it was central to their position, that the nation remained spiritually and culturally bound in a continuous tradition to a Catholic past.⁷ Chesterton's engagement with England's spiritual traditions, artistic, literary, and religious, form a context for his encounter with Belloc's socio-economic history. The Boer War and the First World War and the cultural prominence of the internationalist peace movement also influenced Chesterton's historical vision. They seem to have deepened his patriotic allegiance and strengthened his determination to believe in and defend England's peculiar national tradition.

The Ballad of the White Horse and *A Short History of England* are very different in style, of course, but they were both reflections on Englishness viewed through "the mirror of history" in the wake of wars that had a deep impact on the national consciousness.⁸ Chesterton worked on *The Ballad of the White Horse* on and off through the period of the Boer War and prepared *A Short History of England* for publication as he was in the midst of writing other works of wartime propaganda, such as *The Barbarism of Berlin* (1914) and *The Crimes of England* (1915). In the *Ballad* and the *Short History* Chesterton wrote as patriot and critic of the nation, and readers generally acknowledged his claim to both titles. Reviewers recognized his anti-imperialist radicalism in the *Ballad* and his opposition to the wartime coalition government and its New Liberal policies in the *Short History*, but they did not find in Chesterton's writing enough Bellocian "rash

⁷ John Shelton Reed, *Glorious Battle*.

⁸ A. Dwight Culler takes the image of the 'mirror of history' from Newman's *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*. Culler, *The Victorian Mirror of History* (1985).

political indignation” to prevent his patriotic reworking of the narrative of English history from taking its place in the Whig tradition of a story of continuity and hope.⁹ Chesterton objected to the “jingoism” of most wartime writing and attempted something with more nuance. “It is the pathos of many hackneyed things,” he wrote, “that they are intrinsically delicate and are only mechanically made dull. Anyone who has seen the first white light, when it comes in by a window, knows that daylight is not only as beautiful but as mysterious as moonlight. It is the subtlety of the colour of sunshine that seems to be colourless. So patriotism, and especially English patriotism, which is vulgarised with volumes of verbal fog and gas, is still itself something as tenuous and tender as a climate.”¹⁰ Chesterton had a liberal faith in English history and he hoped to trace a continuous native tradition for his own political radicalism rather than a story of discontinuity and decline.

⁹ Even Grainger notes that while both Chesterton and Belloc “were intent on striking back into native earth,” “Chesterton did it more easily.” *Patriotisms*, 115.

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (1917), 245.

Chapter 7: G. K. Chesterton's *Ballad of the White Horse* and the Whig uses of Alfred

Chesterton's place within the national Whig consensus becomes apparent if one considers his *Ballad of the White Horse* in the context of the Boer War (1899-1902) and the millenary celebrations of the end of King Alfred's reign (1899 or 1901) that coincided with the war. In deciding on Alfred as the subject for an epic poem, Chesterton chose to write within a well-established tradition of patriotic identification, even as he attempted to shed the social-evolutionary perspective that had woven itself into that tradition. Chesterton's choice of Alfred as the hero for his epic poem set him within a national tradition that encompassed a broad range of political perspectives in Britain, and he knew it.

From the first words of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle to the last wireless messages to the Anglo-Saxon clubs and dinners in Boston and Philadelphia, there has been a chiming unanimity . . . A Scottish rationalist like Hume, a romantic Tory like Scott, a Voltairean sceptic like Gibbon, a prudent Catholic like Lingard, an imprudent pro-Catholic like Cobbett, a practical and (spiritually) rather stupid Protestant like Macaulay, would all at any moment have testified to the solid and unquestioned moral reputation of Alfred . . . Alfred was picked out from the first by converging and unwavering beams of the limelight of conventional laudation . . . He is covered with a sort of white radiance that has all the effect of whitewash.¹

One might almost believe from the imagery here that Chesterton was capable of a post-modern perspective on Alfred's career as a Whig symbol. But rather than dismissing the legendary hero with Bellocian disgust as a fraud and an imposition, Chesterton insisted all the more on the necessity of discovering the truth of national identity embedded in the

¹ G. K. Chesterton, "Alfred," collected in Maisie Ward ed., *The English Way: Studies in English Sanctity* (Sheed and Ward, 1933).

tradition. In all the applause, he believed, there must be “a truth that is true in a much more subtle manner than they could understand. When all is said and confessed and contradicted, Alfred of Wessex *is* very English . . . [H]e is a sort of testimony showing how early something distinctive in our insular culture had begun.”² Chesterton assumed that his own generation had to build on the previous attempts to understand Englishness by grappling with the traditional legend of Alfred. The unanimity of praise for Alfred merely signaled the difficulty of the task: “One of our greatest needs in this age is a vocabulary of eulogy as varied, vivid, and picturesque as the vocabulary of calumny . . . [because] the goodness in one man differs from the goodness in another man as much as bigamy differs from petty larceny and vastly more than a good sunset differs from a good horse.”³

Although Chesterton did not publish the *Ballad of the White Horse* in full until 1911, it properly belongs to the period of the millenary celebrations of Alfred and to the category of Boer War poetry.⁴ One of Chesterton’s friends remembered hearing

² G. K. Chesterton, “Alfred,” collected in Maisie Ward ed., *The English Way: Studies in English Sanctity* (Sheed and Ward, 1933).

³ Chesterton, “Carlyle, Ruskin, Buchanan, and Kipling,” *Daily News*, June 26, 1901, (The article is a [signed] review of collected essays or “reprinted reviews” by a “Mr. Murray”).

⁴ It is unfortunate that M. van Wyk Smith does not include the poem in his study *Drummer Hodge: the Poetry of the Anglo-Boer War, 1899-1902* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1978), which examines only two of Chesterton’s shorter poems of the period. Although Wyk Smith says that “[d]uring the Boer War one of the leading figures in this operation to salvage Britain’s moral greatness from the murky waters of a stockbroker empire was G. K. Chesterton” he categorizes Chesterton with those who “did not oppose imperialism in principle, but argued that it had badly miscarried in South Africa,” which I take to be the position of the Fabians, with whom Cecil Chesterton was associated at the time, and

Chesterton recite verses of the poem as early as 1902, and a longer fragment appeared as *A Ballad Epic of Alfred* in 1907 in the first issue of the *Albany Review* along with some poems by Thomas Hardy. Chesterton also used the symbol of the White Horse and the story of Alfred as vehicles for considering English national identity in several early *Illustrated London News* articles, making it clear that the idea for the poem belongs in the context of the wartime controversies. In 1901 Chesterton voiced his frustration with the poetry of the Boer War. “Nothing in the whole psychology of the present war is so significant as the fact that it has produced sheafs of speeches, bushels of essays, and not one good song.”⁵ It was perhaps then that he determined to attempt something on the lines of the *Ballad*. Reading Chesterton’s poem in the context of wartime debates over patriotism reveals that Chesterton’s rewriting of English history was firmly rooted within the Whig consensus and the project of reinterpreting Alfred as a national hero during a period of particular anxiety about the progress of the nation and empire.

King Alfred was a hero of the Whig interpretation of history. He had been popularized as a national hero under the Tudors, but the Stuarts preferred St. Edmund and St. Edward the Confessor as symbolic ancestors because they seemed to embody the idea of a sacramental kingship and the divine right of kings. From 1714 on, with the Hanoverian, Protestant succession, George I and his successors found it useful to revive

perhaps of Belloc (122-123). The “Little England” message of *The Ballad of the White Horse* reveals Chesterton’s deeper skepticism about “imperialism in principle.”

⁵ Chesterton, “Ballads of the War,” [a (signed) unfavorable review of *Ballads of the War* by H. D. Rawnsley, Dent and Co.] *Daily News*, April 19, 1901; See also, Chesterton, “A ‘Kipling Reader,’” [an [unsigned] unfavorable review] *Daily News*, February 21, 1901.

the reputation of Alfred, as an ancient Anglo-Saxon ancestor on whom they could base their legitimacy and Britishness, and as a model of kingly power bounded by parliamentary law.⁶ In the 1730s and again in the aftermath of the French Revolution, Alfred's legacy to the nation became a common, though disputed, heritage for both Whigs and Tory Radicals. In 1734-5 a bust of Alfred was included in among the Whig heroes in Lord Cobham's pleasure grounds at Stowe. In 1740 Thomas Arne wrote a masque, *Alfred*, to be performed for the Prince of Wales. Bolingbroke, the leader of the Tory radicals, appended an ode to Alfred. For eighteenth-century Tory patriot opposition, Alfred was the "Founder of the Liberties and Commonwealth of England" and the Patriot King. The radical Whigs of the French revolutionary period looked to Alfred as the upholder of the Anglo-Saxon constitution guaranteeing ancient liberties against the imposition of the later "Norman yoke," and conservatives appealed to him as the upholder of peculiarly British institutions against foreign, barbaric invasion during the Napoleonic era.⁷ Alfred became a symbol of the converging lines in British historiography that gave late Victorian political views across the spectrum what Burrows has called their a common "liberal descent."

⁶ Lynda Pratt, "Anglo-Saxon attitudes?: Alfred the Great and the Romantic national epic," *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge UP, 2000). 140-1.

⁷ C. Hill, *Puritanism and Revolution. Studies in Interpretation of the English Revolution of the Seventeenth Century* (1958). 98-113. For an overview of political uses of Alfred in English history see Barbara Yorke, "The Most Perfect Man in History?" *History Today*, October 1999, 8-14.

Indeed, the bi-partisan nature of the millenary celebrations of Alfred's reign, what one writer called the "'boom' in all things Alfredian," correlates well with the apotheosis of Whig history as national history at the end of the Victorian period.⁸ Robert Loyd-Lindsay, a Conservative MP donated the statue of Alfred in his birthplace, Wantage, in 1877, and Lord Roseberry, the leader of the Liberal Imperialist wing of the Liberal opposition, chaired the committee to raise a statue of Alfred in his burial place, Winchester, a decade later.⁹

At the same time, Anglo-Saxonism and "Alfredism" revealed the movement of the dominant whiggish view of English history towards an increasing acceptance of a social-evolutionary perspective in which the progressive and imperial British state was the evident goal and end of the national history.¹⁰ The peculiar mark of burgeoning literature on Alfred was the confidence in the future written into the story. The legend that Alfred had been encouraged by some visionary moment—a visit from St. Cuthbert in a dream, an apparition from Mary, a meeting with some hermit-seer—in which the certainty of England's glorious future was vouchsafed to Alfred recurs in the literature.¹¹ As the nineteenth century wore on the historically minded became more squeamish about

⁸ Charles Plummer, *Life and Times of Alfred* (Oxford, 1902). Quoted in Louis Wardlow Miles, *King Alfred in Literature* (Baltimore, 1902) which chronicles the incredible outpouring of histories and fictional works (largely dramas and poetry) dedicated to Alfred since the Tudor period. Miles lists twenty-nine works of history and twelve works of fiction dedicated to Alfred published between 1890 and 1902.

⁹ B. Yorke, "The Most Perfect Man in History?" *op.cit.*, 13-14.

¹⁰ "Alfredism" is B. Yorke's term.

¹¹ See Miles, *King Alfred in Literature*, 55-57 (for a discussion of Blackmore's eighteenth-century epic poem), 58-59 (for discussion of James Thompson and Mallet's famous *Alfred: A Masque*).

relating these legendary apparitions, and the prophetic words had to be placed in the mouths of the living, for example, in St Neot who comes to admonish the fearful Alfred in several late Victorian pieces. Alfred Austin (the poet laureate who prided himself that “for every incident in the following poem there is a foundation, however slight, in written record or in oral hearsay”), in *England's Darling*, his millenary effort to provide “the greatest of Englishmen” with a suitably great epic poem, placed the visionary prediction in the mouth of Alfred himself. In an ironic turn, Alfred appeared to these writers the true heir to the “divine sanction for the civil power,” which when ordered rightly could lay claim to a divine authorization for the extension of its influence, at home and abroad.¹²

The social-evolutionary and statist bent to “Alfredism” often coincided with a racial interpretation of Anglo-Saxonism. The Anglo-Catholic movement and Christian socialists attempted to rouse popular interest in the Anglo-Saxon religious heritage and old English saints with a desire to “establish the dignity and independence of the Church of England” from the state. Some radicals in the early 1800s appealed to Anglo-Saxon traditions to demand a return to localism and radical democracy against the increasing power of parliament. But, “Anglo-Saxonism” as “a major part of British and even more of American political rhetoric from about 1814 onwards” became a racial (rather than

¹² Charles Plummer, *The Life and Times of Alfred the Great* (1902). Appendix: “Subjection to Higher Powers: a Sermon preached before the University of Oxford on Sunday, January 27, 1901, being the Sunday after the death of our late most gracious sovereign Queen Victoria.”

religious or legal/institutional) identification that served the legitimation of a united, progressive, and imperial state.¹³

Two examples from the literature of Alfred's millenary give the range of interpretations of the Anglo-Saxon heritage available during the Boer War period in which Chesterton began work on his *Ballad*. In 1899 Alfred Bowker, the Mayor of Winchester, edited a volume of essays on *Alfred the Great* to commemorate the millennial celebration of Alfred's reign.¹⁴ This volume represented the "official" interpretation of Alfred's relation to national identity and the contemporary national situation. Bowker had organized an international committee of Englishmen, Americans, Canadians, and Australians to purchase the site of Alfred's tomb and to fund the erection of a monument of Alfred, sword held aloft, in Winchester. Lord Roseberry, unveiled the statue, and Sir Walter Besant, gave the oration on the occasion. A picture of the statue, a dedication to the Queen, Walter Besant's speech, and a poem, "The Spotless King," by the poet laureate Alfred Austin form the introductory material to the volume of essays. In 1901, Dugald MacFayden ("Sometime exhibitor in Modern History" at Merton)

¹³ T. A. Shippey, "The undeveloped image: Anglo-Saxon in popular consciousness from Turner to Tolkien," *Literary Appropriations of the Anglo-Saxons from the Thirteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Donald Scragg and Carole Weinberg (Cambridge UP, 2000). 215-237. [I would like to look at *Alfred the Great* (1874), by Thomas Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's School Days*, which seems to have been the most popular version of Alfred during the late Victorian period.]

¹⁴ Alfred Bowker, *Alfred the Great: containing chapters on his Life and Times* (London, 1899). [I am not sure if the later *King Alfred Millenary, a record of the proceeding of the national commemoration* that Bowker edited (London, New York, 1902) is simply a later edition of the same text.]

published *Alfred the West Saxon, King of England*, as part of a series of “Saintly Lives.”¹⁵ MacFadyen’s book does not take a controversial or polemic stand against the official version, but his interpretation of Alfred’s relation to national history demurs from the kind of triumphalism present in Bowker’s celebration. Both works look to Alfred as a symbol of national unity. The contributors to Bowker’s volume conceive of unification as a vaguely defined historic tendency without bounds that serves as a justification for imperialism. MacFadyen finds Alfred’s symbolic value in his drawing the nation to an inward-looking allegiance to a spiritual principle.

The Bowker volume celebrates Alfred as the founder of a united Britain and a united empire—the founder of the unity, “not of England alone, but of the English-speaking race.”¹⁶ Alfred gave a “stimulus towards national union in a larger aggregate,” and his “generous forbearance” towards the Northern invaders resulted in “the ultimate amalgamation of Dane, Angle, and Saxon, which created the compound English race.”¹⁷ Any mention of Alfred’s religiosity celebrates the missionary zeal and “spirit of enterprise” that he imparted to the race for the purpose of extending its empire. “Through all the changes and chances of a thousand years, wherever he [the Anglo-Saxon] has penetrated, wherever he has settled, he has carried with him the same earnestness and the same reality of religion.” This patriotic “spirit of enterprise” enabled “the whole

¹⁵ Dugald MacFadyen, *Alfred the West Saxon King of the English* (London, New York, 1901).

¹⁶ Bowker, *Alfred the Great* (1899), xii.

¹⁷ Bowker, *Alfred the Great* (1899), 53, 56.

commercial history of England” and put her in the “van of progress.”¹⁸ While the continent fell prey to localism, “particularism and heritage-partition,” Alfred supported the “national evolution of the times [that] was tending towards union.”¹⁹

The new monument to Alfred in Winchester, therefore, was erected for “the wise and patriotic purpose” of providing an imperial people with a symbol of unity. “The keynote to be struck and to be maintained will be that Alfred is, and will always remain, the typical man of our race—call him Anglo-Saxon, call him American, call him Englishman, call him Australian—the typical man of our race at his best and noblest.”²⁰ The context of the Boer war and the peace movement’s challenge to British imperialism made such a symbol of unity necessary.

There is... a special reason which makes the erection of such a monument very necessary—I use the word necessary advisedly—at the present time. In the year 1897—on that memorable day when we were all drunk with the visible glory of Empire—there arose in the minds of many a feeling that we ought to teach the people the meaning of what they saw set forth in procession—the meaning of our Empire—not only what it is, but how it came—through whose creation—by whose foundation. Now so much is Alfred the Founder that every ship in our Navy must have his name—every school his bust: every Guildhall his statue. He is everywhere. But he is invisible. And the people do not know him. The boys do not learn about him. There is nothing to show him. We want a monument to Alfred, if only to make the people learn and remember the origin of our Empire—if only that his noble example may be kept before us, to stimulate and to inspire and to encourage.²¹

¹⁸ Bowker, *Alfred the Great* (1899), 18, 63.

¹⁹ Bowker, *Alfred the Great* (1899), 119-120.

²⁰ Bowker, *Alfred the Great* (1899), 37.

²¹ Bowker, *Alfred the Great* (1899), 35-36.

Against those who were beginning to maintain that the empire served the corrupt ambitions of the few, the writers of the memorial volume insisted that the war for empire was a noble expression of the desire to “take up the White Man’s Burden.”²²

In *Alfred the West Saxon*, Dugald MacFadyen also evoked the need for a symbol of unity, in his biography of Alfred, but from a religious perspective. The editor of the series introduced the work by saying that “[n]o saintly life in any religion will be excluded on the plea of heterodoxy. Indeed one service that the series may render will be to recall persons of different name and sect and persuasion, to some of those Divine qualities which appear in all noble human lives... It lays upon the editor the obligation to give candid reception to a motley company who, clad in very various dress, all wear ‘the white flower of a blameless life.’”²³ MacFadyen offered his interpretation of Alfred’s life with an eye to “the squallid and sordid scenes” of war. He considered it necessary to justify Alfred’s role as warrior-king by pointing out that “the man who, under a strong sense of duty, withstands an invasion, must always be judged morally, on different principles from a man who makes fighting a profession, and binds himself to prosecute any war in which the crooked diplomacy of a statesman or the inflammatory passions of his countrymen may happen to involve his country.”²⁴ MacFadyen was no pacifist, but he considered Alfred’s life to be a useful vehicle for raising the questions “May a Christian be a soldier?” and “Given a necessary war, what is the most Christian way of conducting

²² Bowker, *Alfred the Great* (1899), Kipling quoted on 21 and 25.

²³ MacFadyen, *Alfred the West Saxon* (1901), x-xi.

²⁴ MacFadyen, *Alfred the West Saxon* (1901), 161-2.

it?”²⁵ He concludes his discussion saying that if one is to follow Alfred’s footsteps one must “refuse to press the war to the bitter end, to deal with the enemy with the utmost clemency which was compatible with the security of his own kingdom and people.”²⁶ In the year of Emily Hobhouse’s expose of English concentration camps and the government’s pursuit of unconditional surrender, these were fighting words.²⁷ It seems significant that MacFadyen’s book includes a picture of the statue of Alfred in Wantage, in which Alfred clasps the treaty of the Peace of Wedmore to his heart, rather than the Winchester statue with its more militant pose.

MacFadyen believed that myths of Alfred “the inward man” represented the spirit of the nation more than all the imperial institutions of which he was considered retrospectively to be “founder.” Unlike the writers for the Bowker volume (and most of the late-Victorian commentators on Asser’s biography of Alfred), MacFadyen credits the legends of Alfred’s life story (often creations of the Tudor period) with bearing a “character and versimilitude” essential to the national tradition. For example, MacFadyen highlights Alfred’s legendary childhood ability to memorize Saxon religious poetry and his love for illuminated manuscripts. These elements of his early education gave him, according to the tradition, a simple faith in the story of creation, the divine ordering of the world, and man’s place in the work of creating order out of chaos.²⁸ MacFadyen, unlike

²⁵ MacFadyen, *Alfred the West Saxon* (1901), 160-163.

²⁶ MacFadyen, *Alfred the West Saxon* (1901), 163.

²⁷ Arthur Davy, *The British Pro-Boers, 1877-1902* (1978), esp. 58-9. Also, David Nash, “The Boer War and its humanitarian critics,” *History Today*, June 1999, 42-49.

²⁸ MacFadyen, *Alfred the West Saxon* (1901), 12-13, 16-28.

the writers of the Bowker volume, also gives credit to the stories of Alfred's epilepsy, his physical and mental ill-health, and makes Alfred's "struggle for self-mastery" symbolic of the national struggle through the ages. "Alfred was one in a thousand able to battle against disorder within and without at the same time. The issue at stake in this double conflict was the character of the king on whom England's fate would one day turn. It was struggling into shape as the character of a man sometimes defeated but never conquered, convinced that life has a spiritual aspect, and that the spiritual aspect is meant to crown and dignify every other."²⁹

For MacFadyen, Alfred's belief in creative freedom rather than "fate" or "progress" made him an early English radical, willing to "turn the tide" rather than submit to the overwhelming strength of the invaders. In winning the Battle of Ethandune, MacFadyen says, Alfred "becomes the first, if not the creator, of that famous type of Englishmen—the men who win impossible struggles because they never know when they are beaten."³⁰ Alfred's "hour of darkness," alone on the island of Athelney, with his "dream visitations, or spiritual intuitions, or flashes of insight" that enable him to rally against the Danish invasion, has more resonance as a symbol of national spirit in MacFadyen's text than the period of prosperity, and progress following his victory. The inscription below the statue in Wantage speaks to Alfred's symbolic value as the hero of the periodic revival of the failing nation rather than its triumphant march through history.

Alfred found learning dead
And he restored it.

²⁹ MacFadyen, *Alfred the West Saxon* (1901), 56-58.

³⁰ MacFadyen, *Alfred the West Saxon* (1901), 91.

Education neglected
 And he revived it.
 The laws powerless
 And he gave them force.
 The Church debased
 And he raised it.
 The land ravaged by a fearful enemy
 From which he delivered it.

MacFadyen's final eulogy on Alfred is a call for a romantic national history of England, which would chronicle the reawakenings of the living and immortal national spirit rather than narrate the progressive evolution of national character and institutions.

Some day, perhaps, a religious history of England will be written which will not be an ecclesiastical history. A historian will be found to do for our history what the Lake poets did for Nature when they declared that God was not only transcendent over Nature, but immanent in it. Such an one will take account of the way in which epochs issue men, and men in turn create epochs. He will perhaps discover that, as the sensitiveness of the plant to the needs of its environment has some relation to its success in the struggle for permanence, so the sensitiveness of the human spirit to the needs of man and the calls of God has something to do with the perpetuation of a man's influence in human history. He will explain why it is that the men who chose to live for eternity are yet the men from whom the ideas, forces, movements, ideals spring which most dominate time.³¹

In the *Ballad of the White Horse*, Chesterton, like MacFadyen, tried to recover the popular traditions of the Alfred legend, in order to present English national identity as a spiritual reality in need of frequent revival, rather than a progressive movement of racial or institutional development and expansion. Chesterton objected to the Victorians' placing the legend of Alfred at the head of a social-evolutionary history of the nation. When Chesterton first published a fragment of the poem he placed at its head Alfred's famous note to his translation of Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy*: "I say, as do all

³¹ MacFadyen, *Alfred the West Saxon* (1901), 366.

Christian men, that it is divine purpose that rules, and not Fate.” The idea of a divine providence, which included the freedom of mankind, had been squeezed out of interpretations of Alfred’s story, Chesterton thought, by the desire to read Britain’s imperial destiny back on the ancient founder of the nation. The “theorists of German or Anglo-Saxon progress” had overwhelmed the poignant reality of Alfred’s free and heroic action in creating the English nation.

From the way the Victorian historians talked about the Teutons and Saxons and the Germanic institutions, one might really suppose that Alfred was standing at the beginning of the German Empire . . . [The Victorian interpretation of Alfred] was founded on a false conception of history; which supposed such a period to be the beginning of a glorious German or Germanic expansion, instead of the end and ebb of the old Roman expansion. Because it happens to be the beginning of our particular national history it is treated as if it were the morning of the world. The men who lived in that time felt it as the evening of the world; not to say the end of the world... Nobody in the ninth century, however friendly, felt in the least like [they were founding a great empire]. It was not even anything so bright as the beginning of barbarism; it was to all appearance, simply the end of civilization. In some ways, and especially in some places, it was even the end of over-civilization... Alfred had no clear notion of what civilization he was founding; but only of what civilization his enemies were destroying.³²

The only way to recover a sense of Alfred’s freedom, Chesterton believed, was to imagine the world as it looked to Alfred, to imagine the past he knew and ignore the future he did not know. Alfred’s England, or Wessex rather, was nothing more than an abandoned outpost of the Roman Christian empire.

³² G. K. Chesterton, “Alfred,” collected in Maisie Ward ed., *The English Way: Studies in English Sanctity* (Sheed and Ward, 1933). “King Alfred confronts us, blonde and bland, with the battle-axe and helmet of a Viking, but the face of a rather sleepy Quaker; ready to found Christianity, cricket, the Anglo-Saxon race, the Anglo-American alliance, the Boy Scouts or anything else that may require a friendly person in the ninth century to found it.”

For the White Horse knew England
 When there was none to know;
 He saw the first oar break or bend,
 He saw heaven fall and the world end,
 O God, how long ago.

For the end of the world was long ago—
 And we all dwell today
 As children of some second birth,
 Like a strange people left on earth
 After a judgement day.

For the end of the world was long ago,
 When the ends of the world waxed free,
 When Rome was sunk in a waste of slaves,
 And the sun drowned in the sea.

When Caesar's sun fell out of the sky
 And whoso hearkened right
 Could only hear the plunging
 Of the nations in the night.

Chesterton makes the refusal of historical hindsight and prophetic visions the key to his Alfredian narrative.

Chesterton's epic is divided into eight books (an economical epic in comparison to the notoriously length and wordiness of other Alfred poems).³³ The first four books deal with the most popular legends of the Alfred tradition: the vision on the island of Athelney, the story of Alfred in disguise entering the Danish camp to play his harp for the leaders of the invasion, and the story of Alfred (still in disguise) burning a peasant woman's cakes and getting a hiding. (Book II, "The Gathering of the Chiefs," is more of an imaginative elaboration of the story, as reviewers were quick to notice.) It is in these books that Chesterton establishes the symbolic meaning of Alfred's heroic struggle against the Danes. The next three books deal with the Battle of Ethandune, Alfred's

³³ See Miles, *King Alfred in Literature*.

ascendancy, his defeat, and his final rally. The final book, "The Scouring of the Horse," deals with Alfred's legacy of peace and freedom for England.³⁴

The narrative of the *Ballad of the White Horse* begins in Book I with Alfred's defeat and isolation on the island of Athelney, where he has a vision of Mary, the Mother of God, which arises from his recollection of an illuminated manuscript he had seen as a child.³⁵ From the vision he requests foreknowledge of his success or failure against the Danish invaders were he to attempt a second battle. This request, significantly, is refused, and he is charged to fight without knowing the outcome, as a sign of his Christian belief in freedom rather than fate.

'I tell you naught for your comfort,
 Yea, naught for your desire,
 Save that the sky grows darker yet
 And the sea rises higher.

'Night shall be thrice night over you,
 And heaven an iron cope.

³⁴ It would be interesting to compare Chesterton's *Ballad* with Thomas Hughes "well-known" 1859 poem, *The Scouring of the White Horse*, mentioned in Miles. Hughes, author of *Tom Brown's School Days*, also wrote a life of *Alfred the Great* in 1874, republished for the millenary in 1902.

³⁵ And he saw in a little picture,
 Tiny and far away,
 His mother sitting in Egbert's hall,
 And a book she showed him, very small,
 Where a sapphire Mary sat in stall
 With a golden Christ at play.

It was wrought in the monk's slow manner,
 From silver and sanguine shell,
 Where the scenes are little and terrible
 Keyholes of heaven and hell.

Do you have joy without a cause,
Yea, faith without a hope.'

This passage echoes through Book II as Alfred sets out, with this message from the Mother of God, to gather the remnant Christian chieftains of the island. These represent the various races and cultural inheritances that make up the British tradition: Mark, the old Roman with his love for law, Eldred, the Celt imaginative poet, and Colan, the converted Danish warrior. Alfred himself contributes the English love of home and local places, and bears the message of Christian hope and liberty that unites the various tribes against the Danish heathen.

Chesterton's refusal to make Alfred the symbol of Anglo-Saxon strength and racial superiority was one of the first things that contemporary reviewers of *The Ballad of the White Horse* noticed. The Wessexmen that Alfred leads into battle against the barbarian are a diverse crew, gathered from the remaining Christian peoples in England. "Eldred, the Franklin by the sea, / And Mark, the man from Italy, / Colan of the Sacred Tree, / From the old tribe on Usk." Book II of the poem, "The Gathering of the Chiefs," particularly struck reviewers with its memorable celebration of the persistent ethnic diversity of the clans, which ran against the usual idea of the English as a "compound race" amalgamated over centuries. In his narrative, the Battle of Ethandune is clearly a religious and not a racial struggle. For example, one of Alfred's chiefs, Mark, a remnant of the Roman legions, leads "the mixed tribes of the west, / Of many a hue and strain, / Gurth, with rank hair like yellow grass, / And the Cornish fisher, Gorlias, / And Halmer, come from his first mass, / Lately baptized, a Dane." It is, in fact, the Irish clans who come riding to the rescue at the turning point of the final battle, carrying the dead body of their chieftain aloft.

For the Great Gaels of Ireland
 Are the men that God made mad,
 For all their wars are merry,
 And all their songs are sad.

Chesterton's emphasis on the pluralism of the British Isles led one reviewer to describe the section on the Battle of Ethandune as "a good fight described with great spirit, marred only by a short digression on the Irish question."³⁶ Later, in his *Short History of England*, Chesterton reiterated this idea in prose, arguing against "the orthodox modern historians, notably Green," who popularized the idea that Teutonic blood was the key to English identity and the development of English liberty. His chapter on Alfred opens with what can only be described as a rant against "the learned who grope in the darkness of unrecorded epochs for the roots of their favorite race or races." "The physical difference between the Celts, the Teutons, and the Latins," he writes, "really played no fundamental a part in human history."³⁷

³⁶ *Allahabad Pioneer*; September 27, 1911; *Saturday Review*, September 16, 1911. Predictably, Liberals loved and Tories disliked Chesterton's description of Conan the Celt: "He is the Gael beloved of the journalist, our old friend "the Celtic Movement" incarnate." Irish reviewers liked the poem. See James B. Dollard ("Sliev-na-mon"), "Lines to Gilbert Chesterton: after 'Ballad of the White Horse,'" *Irish Independent*, March 13, 1912:

Your theme is England Catholic,
 When all from Thames to Tyne,
 When British churls and Roman lords
 And Saxon thanes and Cymric hordes,
 And Celts with over-ready swords,
 All made the Roman's sign.

³⁷ Chesterton, "The Defeat of the Barbarians," *A Short History of England* (1917), 40-53.

English identity, according to Chesterton, was a spiritual identity, an allegiance to the Christian principle of liberty. Chesterton outlines the spiritual struggle symbolized by the Battle of Ethandune in Book III, where he recounts the legend of “The Harp of Alfred,” the story that Alfred was brought into the Danish camp in disguise to listen to their war songs and play his own. Here Chesterton creates counterparts to Alfred and his band of chiefs: Guthrum, the leader of the Danes who has a cyclical, *vanitas vanitatum* view of history; Harold, his nephew, who believes in racial power and the survival of the fittest; Elf, whose song is a *lacrimae rerum*, the emptiness and fruitlessness of all things; and Ogier, who relishes an angry nihilism. In reply, Alfred sings his song of faith in created liberty.

When God put man in a garden
 He girt him with a sword,
 And sent forth a free knight
 That might betray his lord.

This belief in freedom gives the Christian English a conquering spirit, Alfred says, because “You are more tired of victory,/ Than we are tired of shame,” “We have more lust to lose / Than you to win again.” In the Christian vision of history, the world is a place of liberty, where nothing is inevitable, where kings are fallible, and where resurrection and revolution are possible. Alfred, laughing at himself for getting whipped by an old peasant woman for absent-mindedly allowing her cakes to fall into the fire and burn, sings of the laughter at the gods of fate, laughter that he says rings through all Christian, liberal versions of history.³⁸

³⁸ The giant laughter of Christian men
 That roars through a thousand tales,
 Where greed is an ape and pride is an ass,
 And Jack’s away with the master’s lass,

Books V, VI, and VII contain Chesterton's account of the Battle of Ethandune, where Eldred, the figure of Celtic imagination, destroys Harold's racial pride, and the order and discipline of Mark the Roman conquers the Elf's refusal to accept the fruitfulness of reality. But Guthrum's *vanitas vanitatum* and Ogier's nihilistic anger defeat Alfred and kill all his chiefs. Alfred turns this defeat into victory, by leading a give-me-liberty-or-give-me-death charge of the Danes with only his common foot soldiers left.

‘The men that tear the furrows,
 The men that fell the trees,
 When all their lords be lost and dead
 The bondsman of the earth shall tread
 The tyrants of the seas.

This display of freedom in the face of death wins the aid of the Mother of God. The Battle of Ethandune is won, Guthrum is converted at the witness of the English, and the peace of England is won.

In Book VIII, Chesterton has Alfred choose between taking up the “White Man's burden” to continue conquering the island and the world for Christian and liberal

And the miser is banged with all his brass,
 The farmer with all his flails;

Tales that tumble and tales that trick,
 Yet end not all in scorning—
 Of kings and clowns in a merry plight,
 And the clock gone wrong and the world gone right,
 That mummers sing upon Christmas night
 And Christmas Day in the morning.

This verse leads one to believe that Chesterton was also familiar with the popular tradition of Alfredian burlesques, parodies, and pantomimes that trails the heroic epics and dramas. See Miles, *King Alfred in Literature*, 48-52, 74-76, 78-80, 85-86.

civilization or careful maintenance of the peace and liberty within his own small kingdom. His ministers ask him

‘Why dwell the Danes in North England,
 And up to the river ride?
 Three more such marches like thine own
 Would end them; and the Pict should own
 Our sway; and our feet climb the throne
 In the mountains of Strathclyde.’

But Alfred refuses to extend his kingdom even over the rest of the British Isles, fearing that they will ask him to go “Not to Rome only, but more bold, /Out to the high hot courts of old,/ Of negroes clad in cloth of gold,/ Silence, and crooked swords,/ Scrawled screens and secret gardens/ And insect laden skies.” He replies:

‘Asia and all imperial plains
 Are too little for a fool;
 But for one man whose eyes can see
 The little island of Athelney
 Is too large a land to rule . . .

‘An island like a little book
 Full of a hundred tales,
 Like the gilt page the good monks pen,
 That is smaller than a wren,
 Yet hath high towns, meteors, and men,
 And suns and spouting whales.

Maintaining good rule and freedom at home is more difficult and more important than exporting them abroad, Chesterton has Alfred conclude.

A legend told how Alfred cut the White Horse on a hill to commemorate his famous victory over the Danes. Chesterton equates Alfred’s dedication to the on-going maintenance of freedom, to the never-ending task of those “who plucked the old Horse of weed / As they pluck it to this day.”

With velvet finger, velvet foot,
 The fierce soft mosses then

Crept on the large white commonweal
 All folk has striven to strip and peel,
 And the grass, like a great green witch's wheel,
 Unwound the toils of men.

The returning “talk of trend and tide,/ And wisdom and destiny” signals the return of “the stillness of tyranny,” and the need for Alfred to rise again and encourage men to a belief in freedom.

In the dedication of the poem to his wife Frances, Chesterton makes the act of narrating the national history an almost sacramental recollection of the life of heroic figures, meant to accomplish the resurrection of the national spirit in the reader.

Where seven sunken Englands
 Lie buried one by one,
 Why should one idle spade, I wonder,
 Shake up the dust of thanes like thunder
 To smoke and choke the sun?

The answer is that “the England of that dawn remains,” and even though it seems “too English to be true,” it lives again in Chesterton and in the readers who “look from Alfred's hood, / Or breathe his breathe alive,” by adopting his liberal faith and Christian vision of history as the record of free human action.

Lady, by one light only
 We look from Alfred's eyes,
 We know he saw athwart the wreck
 The sign that hangs about your neck,
 Where One more than Melchisadek
 Is dead and never dies.

Contemporary reviewers understood the meaning of the poem in the context of the Boer War peace movement of the decade before. There were frequent complaints that

the message of *The Ballad of the White Horse* was too much like Chesterton's "familiar but ever delightful column in Saturday's *Daily News*"; Chesterton was merely "thwacking away" at his "particular hobbyhorse," "forever a-tilt against Imperialism."³⁹ While Chesterton threw scorn on the notion that Alfred was a proto-type of the imperial Briton, his critics observed that "[i]t is not, after all, in the least likely that Alfred was a Radical and it is equally improbable that he was a Little Englander," one reviewer objected. "A man had no time to develop pacifist and international arbitration ideas when the whole of his time was spent in life and death struggles with the Danes."⁴⁰ It was objected that "Mr. Chesterton too openly snatched the monarch's harp from his hand to improvise his own philosophical manifesto."⁴¹ Reviewers who would have preferred Chesterton to have placed Alfred in the progressive national history culminating in the glorious empire, nevertheless recognized Chesterton as a patriotic voice and applauded his project of taking a heroic episode and through it conveying the spirit of the whole history of the nation. Most reviewers willingly overlooked the "inevitable Chestertonian sermon" in their enthusiasm for "the impetuous rush and roar of the splendid story." "A magnificent poem—a true ballad," they exclaimed.⁴² "There are stanzas which glow with the old ardour and feeling of the great ballads of the sixteenth century. There are other

³⁹ *English Review*, October issue, 1911; *Commentator*, September 27, 1911; *Review of Reviews*, October 11, 1911; *Sheffield Telegraph*, September 21, 1911.

⁴⁰ *Allahabad Pioneer*, September 27, 1911. This reviewer also compares the *Ballad* to *A School History of England* by C.R.L. Fletcher and Rudyard Kipling and "Puck of Pook's Hill," which take a single historic episode as a prism through which to convey the spirit of the whole history of the nation.

⁴¹ *Saturday Review*, September 16, 1911.

⁴² *Englishwoman*, October issue, 1911.

stanzas charged with the haunting and elusive music which suggests the finest work of Coleridge.”⁴³ The *Sheffield Telegraph* reviewer spoke for the majority when he wrote, “Our political quarrel with Mr. Chesterton cannot blind us to the rare beauty of his allegorical ballad” which would, he felt, “ensure its life long after the truth and truism and the casual philosophizings of the journalistic Mr. Chesterton are ‘buried in the columns of the files.’”⁴⁴

In fact, the most critical appraisals of the poem came from those on the left who objected to Chesterton’s patriotic celebration of Alfred as a national hero. Chesterton’s usual audience in the Liberal press seemed pleasantly surprised that their radical “pamphleteer” could turn out such poetry.⁴⁵ But they thought of him as a mere pamphleteer-turned-poet and tended to dislike the poetic fervour displayed in the cause of patriotism, despite its liberal radical coloring. Unfavourable comparisons to the jingoism of Kipling’s poetry were frequent in the Liberal Press. The *English Review* advised Chesterton to learn from the failure of Kipling’s *Stalky and Co.* “the lesson that consciously organized patriotism is rather indecent”:

We are a little uneasy when we find Epics being written to encourage us to love England: Mr. Alfred Noyes making a sort of Tarrif Reform Hero out of Drake, and Mr. Chesterton with a defence of Little England, a ballad of popular tradition about Alfred, King of Wessex, and his fight for “an island like a little book/ Full of a hundred tales.”⁴⁶

⁴³ *Daily Graphic*, September 20, 1911.

⁴⁴ *Sheffield Telegraph*, September 21, 1911.

⁴⁵ *Montreal World Wide*, October 7, 1911; *New Age*, October 26, 1911; *Yorkshire Post*, September 27, 1911; *Hereford Times*, October 28, 1911.

⁴⁶ *English Review*, October issue, 1911.

The epic or ballad form itself, now identified with Kipling's work, seemed to offend those who saw Chesterton's primary value as a radical propagandist.⁴⁷

There was no clear sense on either end of the political spectrum that Chesterton was debunking the whole edifice of Whig national history and patriotism for the sake of Bellocian "rash political indignation." The poem appeared in time for George V's coronation and was taken as a thoroughly patriotic poem, despite its anti-imperialism, pro-Irish Home Rule, political radical undertones. One reviewer even suggested that Chesterton ought to be named poet laureate and compared the poem favorably to Tennyson's "Idylls of the King."⁴⁸ The reviewer for the *Yorkshire Post* expressed this consensus that the *Ballad of the White Horse* fell within the Whig tradition of Alfredism when he wrote, "Since Macaulay wrote, no better, no more thrilling and soul-stirring ballad than this telling of Alfred and the Danes has been given to us."⁴⁹

⁴⁷ *Westminster Review*, September 23, 1911; *T.P.'s Weekly*, October 6, 1911; *Daily Graphic*, September 20, 1911; *Western Morning News*, October 1911 (which notes, in the middle of a very positive review, that "perhaps in a few places there is a touch of the merely Kipling style of ballad, to the level which nationalism too easily sinks.")

⁴⁸ "Should Chesterton be Poet Laureate?" *M.A.P.*, September 23, 1911. "In reading the Idylls we cannot but feel a certain irritation, at the way in which violent events are described in polished, I had almost said polite, verse. The lines read with a superficiality, which with all its perfections, often smells of lamp oil, or, to be correct, cigar smoke. It is quite different with Mr. Chesterton's verse. He recognizes that a rugged story must be told in rugged verse . . . The amazing success of Mr. Chesterton's poem is that in the twentieth century he has been able to steep his mind in the spirit of the ballad." This was followed by a letter to the editor, *M.A.P.* September 30, 1911, depreciating Chesterton's poetic talent and suggesting Austin Dobson or Rudyard Kipling instead.

⁴⁹ *Yorkshire Post*, September 27, 1911.

Selections from the *Ballad* were included in Edward Marsh's collection, *Georgian Poetry* (1912-1922) as representative of the period, but the *Ballad* did not gain much attention from later critics. Written as Little England, anti-war poetry during the Anglo-Boer War that it was, it was taken for pro-war poetry in the aftermath of World War I. There were reports of its being read in the trenches and after the war and Chesterton, who had written under the auspices of Charles Masterman's war propaganda agency, was often classed with imperialist warmongers while the Little England message of the *Ballad* was forgotten.⁵⁰ The *Ballad's* radical-liberal version of Englishness was remembered, however, at the peak of heroic-patriotic rhetoric in World War II. Chesterton died in 1936 and the flood of obituaries, memoirs, biographies, and posthumous collections of his essays, revived the memory of Chesterton's early career as a patriotic voice of Little England. School children performed the *Ballad of the White Horse* and the dark but encouraging message that Chesterton put in the mouth of the Marian apparition to Alfred during the invasion of the barbarians from the north was

⁵⁰ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (1990), 26. C. S. Lewis, *Time and Tide*, 9 November 1946. "The anti-Germanicism in the *Ballad of the White Horse* belongs to a silly and transitory historical heresy of Mr. Belloc's—always, on the intellectual side, a disastrous influence on Chesterton." Chesterton before the war was part of the upstart anti-Victorian young generation. After the war, however, his definition of England in opposition to Germany, which had been startling in the wake of the Victorian era, appeared to the younger generation as a profoundly conservative view, representative of the bloodthirsty old men who had sent of the young to be slaughtered in France and Flanders. Literary critic Desmond McCarthy, in a *Sunday Times* review of Chesterton's complete poems, which were collected in 1923, suggested as much. Interestingly, McCarthy lights on *the Ballad of the White Horse* as a vehicle for this reading of Chesterton as a Kiplingesque nationalist and war-monger. When the poem first appeared in 1911, the public clearly understood it as an anti-imperialist Little Englander poem, and the conservative papers had particularly objected to what it considered its pacifist undertones.

repeated over the air and in the press during the bombing of London.⁵¹ In the interim, perhaps, the liberal consensus and whiggish confidence in possession of the national past faltered and readers took too literally Chesterton's words, "The England of that dawn remains, / And this is Alfred and the Danes / Seems like the tales a whole tribe feigns / Too English to be true."

⁵¹ Joseph Pearce, *Wisdom and Innocence: A Life of G. K. Chesterton* (1996), 162-167. Pearce notes that C. S. Lewis was among many who remembered turning to *The Ballad of the White Horse* for comfort and courage during World War II. Lewis's friend and mentor Charles Williams was one of the literary critics who kept enthusiasm for the poem alive. He wrote that the Ballad was "not only Mr. Chesterton's finest poem, but in itself one of the greatest of modern poems." See Charles Williams, *Poetry at Present* (New York: Books for Libraries Press, 1969. Originally published 1930), 104. Williams also wrote that Chesterton's particular poetic ability was the creation of a sense of peace in danger and defeat. "In the midst of poetry which seems to express nothing but war, in the midst of topical jokes and topical satires, of a shouted surprise and a roaring combativeness, there arises a sense of peace . . . It is in the hour of defeat that he, like Alfred, is most himself.

'The line breaks, and the gunds go under,
 The lords and the lackeys ride the plain,
 And I draw deep breaths of the dawn and thunder
 And the whole of my heart grows young again . . .
 For we that fight till the world is free
 We are not easy in victory,
 We have known each other too long, my brother,
 And fought each other, the world and we.'" (112)

Chapter 8: Chesterton's version of modern English history

Chesterton's choice of Alfred in the *Ballad* as a heroic Englishman who could speak unproblematically to the nation in the twentieth-century seemed to deny any radical break in English history at the time of the Reformation and to reassert a whiggish continuity with the past. Yet the poem, set in early medieval England, could still be read as an exposition of the Bellocian belief in a lost constitution, because Chesterton did not need to address directly Belloc's assertion that the old liberal English nation had disappeared from history in the centuries after the Reformation.

Chesterton dealt with modern English history in a way in his early literary criticism. He revealed his piety towards England's liberal past in his defenses of Robert Browning and Charles Dickens in the context of the Whig interpretation of English literature. He would give his most developed version of English literary history in *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913). In this literary history—often the book by Chesterton which is highlighted as his most lasting work—he attempted to respond more directly than he did in his earlier literary criticism to the historical revisionists and radicals. The figure of Charles Dickens again plays the central role in re-establishing a continuous narrative of English liberalism that lasted through the nineteenth century to the present. The narrative of the book was whiggish without being complacent, but events of the immediately pre-war years would challenge the level of assurance of England's liberal past Chesterton manifested in his literary history, so that as the country came to the brink of war, Chesterton stood poised between his old liberal pieties and a new, bitterly ironic sense of English politics and history.

He first attempted to create a more complete narrative of modern history—dealing with economic and political as well as literary events—under the pressure of writing patriotic propaganda during World War I. Chesterton felt confident in his own judgement in the field of literary history, but for the elements of this larger project he relied a great deal on his friend Hilaire Belloc's reading of England's economic and political history. In Chesterton's wartime propaganda, therefore, the radical narrative of the subversion of the true English tradition threatened to become dominant. He struggled to maintain his whiggish allegiance to England despite the indictments of this radical history and this struggle can be traced through *The Barbarism of Berlin* (1914) and *The Crimes of England* (1915). In *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* (1915), his confidence in the significance of the war in resolving the tensions in English history seemed to return or resurface.

In *The Victorian Age in Literature*, Chesterton defends the Victorian Romantics against what he saw as efforts by Imperialist Tories and Liberals alike to "Teutonize" the history of nineteenth-century English literature. He claims that the liberal Romantics continued the national literary tradition that derived from England's Roman and Christian past through the Victorian period, and this argument enables him to evade the full implications of Belloc's critique of modern English society and politics. Chesterton justifies his selection of the "English Romantics" as the representative writers of the period in the opening essay of the book, "The Victorian Compromise and Its Enemies." The liberal romantic writers were the "enemies" of the socio-economic tendencies of

Victorian culture, he says, and guarded the ancient and popular English tradition in their writing so that it could survive into the present.

Chesterton begins by arguing that England's "national spirit" as expressed in her literary tradition is a kind of "pride in talking nonsense" and a satirical laughter at all humanity including oneself that expresses a fundamentally democratic acceptance of a common human nature. English culture received this comic character, he says, when it "drank its longest literary draughts from the classic foundations of the ancients" and from the "popular Latin of the Middle Ages." He argues that medieval, Elizabethan, and eighteenth-century English literature is marked by the Latin tendency "to employ an extravagance that is half conscious and therefore half-humorous." When truly English writers like Chaucer, Shakespeare or Johnson deal with deep emotion, he says, they tend to rant, roar, exaggerate and to be rowdy, sentimental, common, and comic. He contrasts their unrestrained romanticism of the English with German romanticism, which, he says, tends to be serious and self-restrained.¹ In English literature, he says, there is none of the German ability to "sing perfectly serious songs perfectly seriously in chorus," which sets the group apart as something spiritually or culturally unique and sublime.

Chesterton argues that during the nineteenth century the democratic spirit embedded in English romanticism was threatened by what he calls "the British heresy," a spectrum of thought that ran from Bentham to Macaulay and came like a "cold rain of rationalism." After the French Revolution, "England became more of an island than she had ever been" because "she had not joined in the attempt to create European democracy; nor did she, save in the first glow of Waterloo, join in the counter-attempt to destroy it."

¹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Victorian Age in Literature* (1913), 12.

Utilitarianism, Bentham's "cold science of self-interests," became "the philosophy in office" in the Victorian period, and Macaulay's glorification of the evolution of British bureaucratic rationalism became its historiographical ally. This intellectual tradition justified the Victorian "aristocratical compromise" by which the upper class "recruit[ed] more freely from the middle class" in order to resist "a clean sweep and a clear democratic programme." Chesterton adds, in the final essay of the book, that this "British heresy" in politics and thought culminated in late nineteenth-century social Darwinism, which corrupted even "all that was good in Victorian rationalism." Eugenic theory—"nonsense not yet quite dead about the folly of allowing the unfit to survive"—replaced the "beautiful faith in human nature and in freedom that had made delicate the dry air of John Stuart Mill."

Chesterton therefore turns to the English Romantics to find the embodiment of the native literary spirit in the Victorian period. "Roman Britain and Medieval England [we]re still not only alive but lively," he says. Despite the triumph of utilitarian social reform in England's political life, "the life in her literature was still, to a large extent, the romantic liberalism of Rousseau, the free and humane truisms that had refreshed the other nations, the return to Nature and to natural rights." "[T]hough . . . simple Victorian rationalism held the centre, and in a certain sense *was* the Victorian era, it was assailed on many sides . . . The rest of the intellectual history of the time is a series of reactions against it, which come wave after wave." The names Arnold, Ruskin, Carlyle, and Newman, he says, "are roughly representative of the long series of protests against the cold commercial rationalism which held Parliament and the schools through the earlier Victorian time, in so far as those protests were made in the name of neglected intellect,

insulted art, forgotten heroism and desecrated religion.” In Dickens’s novels and Browning’s poetry, English Romanticism revived a “warm wind that had never blown so strong since Chaucer.” Chesterton thus imagines the “British heresy” as an interlude in national literary history and an interlude touching only certain sections of English culture. Chesterton allows for a deep dissonance between the triumph of utilitarianism in the British political and economic order and the continuance of the “real English spirit” in literature. He considered the national literature as a kind of political reserve against the new status quo. He characterizes “The Victorian Age in Literature” as an almost universal reversion to normal Englishness.

Chesterton gives Dickens is the role of hero in his narrative of continuity in a Latin, liberal heritage in English literature. He describes him as “one lonely and unlettered man of genius” who bombarded “the Utilitarian citadel” more heavily than all the others. He celebrate Dickens’s revival of the sentimental melodrama and comic satire of England’s native Latin tradition, saying that he was untouched as a writer by the Puritan tone that underpinned Victorian utilitarianism. Chesterton insists that Dickens’s allegiance to this tradition was more genuine for being unconscious: “Dickens did not in the least understand the Latin society; but he did understand the wine.” His novels convey no sense of a gradation in humanity or a kind of spiritual elitism: in both his heroic and villainous characters, Dickens “had the power of creating . . . simply precious and priceless people.” “Dickens (unlike the social reformers) really did sympathize with every sort of victim of every sort of tyrant.”

Chesterton also takes Dickens’s democratic spirit to represent the importation of the French Revolution into English history, to take away her reproach among nations and

reunite her to European liberalism. “The rise of Dickens is like the rising of a vast mob . . . Dickens was a mob—a mob in revolt.” Not only, Chesterton says, are “his tales . . . as crowded and populous as towns; [so that] it is not so much that Dickens appeared as that a hundred Dickens characters appeared,” but his tales are full of a “confused clamour of comradeship and insurrection.” Dickens “represents the return of Cobbett” and a tradition of liberalism that had been betrayed by the “Victorian political compromise” and the “British heresy” of utilitarianism.

Finally, Chesterton also gives Dickens a central role in his narrative because he takes Dicken’s career to represent the path along which England’s native literary tradition was passing, from the Victorian men-of-letters to the world of popular writing for a mass audience. Popular writers, Dickens and Cobbett, are the heroes of Chesterton’s narrative. He gives Shaw and Kipling honorable mention in the final essay for their refusal to separate art and journalism in the wake of the late-Victorian “interregnum of art-for-arts sake.” He believed that Shaw’s socialist plays and Kipling’s imperialist poems were signs that the “British heresy” had not triumphed completely. He considered their popularity was a sign that “the world was full of the trampling of totally new forces,” even at the moment when the late Victorians almost brought the continuous life of the “nation spirit” perilously close to a definitive end—“About 1870 the force of the French Revolution faltered and fell: the year that was everywhere the death of Liberal ideas: the year when Paris fell: the year when Dickens died.” Chesterton finds Shaw and Kipling’s “cynical romanticism” disturbing, but he nevertheless applauds their refusal to hide behind the Victorian pretense of impartiality as a revival of the liberal use of satire and comic irony in England.

Chesterton himself was the third term implied in any reference to Shaw and Kipling as the greatest figures of the Edwardian literary scene, so that, *The Victorian Age in Literature* provides him with a literary genealogy on which to base his own claim to a central place in the English literary tradition. He was the liberal radical journalist and popular writer who should most properly take the baton from Dickens and Browning. His identification of these contemporaries as heroes reveals the extent to which Chesterton was able, in February 1913 when he published *The Victorian Age in Literature* for the "Home University Series," to envision England's history as a narrative continuity culminating in the present. He was capable of formulating a pious history of England in which he himself was not averse to take a part.

In February 1913, however, A. D. Gardiner, the editor of the *Daily News* asked for Chesterton's resignation. His last Saturday column culminated a thirteen-year series that linked the *Daily News* and "GKC" in the public mind. Chesterton had joined the editorial staff as a literary critic when George Cadbury first acquired the paper in hopes of keeping at least one London paper open to anti-war opinion during the Boer War. The first years of the century had been an exhilarating time for the close-knit and embattled group of "pro-Boers," but after the 1906 election of the Liberals, tensions over in-office policy had grown. Hilaire Belloc, who won office in the 1906 election, wrote of his disgust with the Liberal government in *The Party System*, co-authored with Cecil Chesterton in 1911, and expanded on his disillusionment with British history and politics

in general in *The Servile State* (1912).² Also, in February 1913, the same month that *The Victorian Age in Literature* was published and Chesterton wrote his final article for the *Daily News*, his brother Cecil was brought to court for criminal libel for the vehement charges of government corruption in the Marconi scandal that were published in his and Belloc's political magazine, the *New Witness*. The conjunction of events seemed to set the stage for Chesterton to plunge into Bellocian "rash political indignation" and an ironic view of English history.

Chesterton objected to the Liberal Licensing Bill as the illiberal legislation of "puritanism"; he objected to the proposed Education Bill, which he saw as further establishing, rather than lessening, the state's prerogative to control religious education; and he objected to the Liberal government's "in-house" handling of the 1909 Constitutional crisis, which his brother Cecil and Belloc considered further evidence of the collusion of the political elite of both parties. He had even more serious objections to the National Insurance Bill, which he considered a deliberate "drain on the trade union funds" and to a proposal for the eugenic sterilization of criminals and the "feeble-minded."

Overarching all his dissent from his party, was his concern at a perceived loss of freedom in the Liberal press network in which he had made his career. He felt that the owners of the paper were pressuring the editors to create a "false unanimity" of approval for the government's policies and that the new rule of conformity placed him personally in a "false position, which no honest man can safely permit to pass a certain point." He

² In "The Voter and the Two Voices," in *A Miscellany of Men* (1912), Chesterton echoes the argument Belloc makes in the *Party System*.

frequently reminded his readers that Charles Dickens had pioneered the *Daily News* as a liberal forum for criticism of the government. The pretense on the part of the *Daily News* that “there is no conscientious objection to the [Insurance] Act among democrats” caused his “poor old conscience [to] burst its bonds.”

Chesterton’s personal struggle with his position as a writer for the *Daily News* unfolded as an internal battle between a pious and an ironic view of the past. In “An Open Letter to the Liberal Party” he plays off illusion and reality: “I thought you stood for two distinct but kindred ideas; the idea of liberty and the idea of democracy . . . But as I watch the actual proceedings in your present Parliament I am chiefly struck by the silence and swiftness with which you pass Bills which destroy liberty, by methods which ignore democracy.” With his open letter, Chesterton deliberately poised himself for a break with his paper and his party, but at the same time, he insisted that he had “no temperamental affinity with tearing up roots; I am a Radical that has grown fond of his roots.” He was eager to maintain his ties to the Liberal Party, whose history he evoked in recalling the Boer War days and “the great fights against a swollen and cynical thing, which called itself, I think, an Empire.” These memories, he said, “would always tie me to you with ties that are as irrational and as strong as youth.” “I am the sort that is very difficult to dig out of its past; and even if you, Liberal party, lost your claim to the title I should always be enough of a conservative to call myself Liberal.”³

Chesterton’s “Open Letter” sparked controversy in the correspondence section that continued until he left the *Daily News* the following year, and the rising tide of

³ G. K. Chesterton, “Open Letter to the Liberal Party,” *Daily News*, August 24, 1912; “False Unanimity,” *Daily News*, August 31, 1912.

disagreement overwhelmed even Chesterton's store of insider's banter and he began to make a distinction between his reading public and "the people" beyond, a dichotomy that had always been present in his thought, but which became increasingly characteristic at this time.⁴ He pictured himself speaking to "the people" on "hoardings or pamphlets or paving-stones" if the newspaper forum was not allowed to him.⁵ He insisted that "[we] who read or write this paper . . . we of the middle classes, we of the sort that are Liberal journalists, Socialist pamphleteers, or Free Church divines" need to realize that "we" do not represent "the people."⁶ This disjunction between liberal journalists, himself

⁴ For earlier examples of this dichotomy see: Chesterton, "The Orthodoxy of Hamlet," *Daily News*, May 18, 1907: "The truth is there is no such thing as education; there is only this education or that education... democracy: a desperate and partly hopeless attempt to get at the opinion of the best people—that is, of the people who do not trust themselves . . . I believe in the judgement of all uncultured people; but it is my misfortune that I am the only quite uncultured person in England who writes articles. My brethren are silent. They will not back me up; they have something better to do...they will not speak; with a strange modesty they hide their lack of cultivation under a bushel." See also Chesterton, "What is Said," *Daily News*, February, 5, 1909: "Modern people, especially urban people, think that anything which has got itself printed has somehow passed an examination and received a diploma... [E]ven standard books and government documents are full of errors which common conversation or local knowledge could correct... As all that is said in the country has to pass at last through a small printing press, only the smallest and meekest utterances can ultimately appear. But if the whole country were one enormous phonograph it would be a phonograph bellowing the most boisterous and even brutal discontent." See also, Chesterton, "The Unpopularity of the People," *Daily News*, December 18 1909.

⁵ Chesterton, "The Soldier of Freedom," *Daily News*, September 28, 1912,

⁶ Chesterton, "The Red Clay," *Daily News*, April 6, 1912: "This thing which has recently shaken the pillars of wealth is not Us. It is not Liberalism; it is not Socialism; it is not Syndicalism. It is neither Puritan nor Catholic; it is pagan, like the aristocracy. It cares as little for the fancies and ideals of the middle class as it does for the vetoes and proprieties of the middle class. It is a very ancient thing that you may have read about in the Sagas and the Iliad and the Old Testament; its proper name is not democracy or even humanity; for the abstraction connotes the idealism of ethical societies. It is Man."

included, and the genuine English people echoes through his last articles for the *Daily News*.

I do from time to time see my name in the papers . . . [I]n the same papers I see that a man, who happens to be a friend of mine, has just been chosen for an "International" in the world of football. I try to think soberly of the people who have heard of me, and the much more numerous (and more happy) people who have heard of him. If I cannot realise this, if I cannot imagine them, I shall never be a democrat. "Think of it! Never!" as Stevenson said to Cosmo Monkhouse in telling him he would never be a pirate.⁷

Chesterton was not satisfied however with describing his own position as over-and-against the English people. He tried to equate his defiant refusal to be silenced by the editors of the *Daily News* with the strikes of the working class "living down on the Docks." He encouraged readers to "dry any tears . . . shed over my isolation." I am united, he claimed, to the working class man who believed in the right to strike, who believed that "a man defying injustice, at a risk, is not neglecting his home, but rather defending its honour."⁸ In his final *Daily News* article, he again claimed solidarity with

⁷ Chesterton, "The Map of Modesty," *Daily News*, January 11, 1913.

⁸ This sounds like self-defense against a backdrop of accusations to the contrary. Cecil Chesterton and Belloc had written biting criticism of C.F.G. Masterman, Chesterton's friend and a fellow journalist who had risen to a Cabinet position in the Liberal government and who authored the National Insurance Bill, because they believed he had "sold out" on his old liberal ideals. In reply, Masterman had written rather scathingly of Chesterton, implying that it was he who had become one of those "deferential and prostrate" men, "who cannot be bought because they have sold themselves already." (See also Chesterton's dedication of *What's Wrong With the World* to C. F. G. Masterman for more indication of this quarrel.) Opponents to the left and right used Chesterton's affiliation with the *Daily News* as a taunt, perhaps, especially on the left, in hopes of winning Chesterton away to their own side. Shaw referred to Chesterton as "a flourishing property of Mr. Cadbury's," and the *Academy* dubbed him "Man Friday" to "Mr. Robinson Crusoe Cadbury, of Daily News Island," a "faithful henchman" in the press for the service of the Liberal government (On Shaw, Maisie Ward, 256; "Man Friday," *Academy*, February 5, 1908). In response to such criticism, Chesterton

the working class. Like the worker who was subject to the fluctuations of the market, or the clerk subject to “banking affairs that ramify all over Europe,” “the journalist is still subject to the editor, but in the invasions of capitalism he may know less and less to what ultimate power the editor is subject.” “We are all servants” but “we know less and less about whom we are serving.” We are all servants alike, he said, but dressed in an “unknown livery.”⁹

From 1913 to 1914, Chesterton transferred his usual Saturday column to the socialist paper, the *Daily Herald*, and wrote a series of articles on freedom of the press for the *British Review*, a weekly Catholic journal. He heightened the effect of his inevitably public defection from the Liberal press with his second article in the *Daily Herald*. His picture appeared above the article, which was on the right to strike and was entitled “Sack the Employer.”¹⁰ Chesterton’s series of *Daily Herald* articles are examples of his most disaffected journalism. Yet he always wrote as if his bitterness was directed against what he saw as an elite minority and not against the ignorant mass of English people. He did not succumb to Belloc and the socialists’ ironic bitterness towards the whole tradition of English liberal democracy. When liberal political philosophy was criticized in the *Daily Herald*, he wrote, “I decline to listen in silence; for the honour of

became increasingly provocative in his articles, perhaps following Cecil’s lead, eager for a fight, even if it led to libel charges. On 26 October 1912 in an article entitled “The Fear of Challenge” (an article ostensibly about appeasement in the Balkan crises), Chesterton offers an earlier version of his poetic challenge to Cadbury: “But only a cad, or (to vary the phrase) a capitalist, denies the existence of his enemy. An employer can easily discover, if he chooses to think a little, what is meant by being ‘unrecognised.’ In his class, which uses coarser language, it is called being “cut.”

⁹ Chesterton, “The Unknown Livery,” *Daily News*, February 1, 1913.

¹⁰ Chesterton, “Sack the Employer,” *Daily Herald*, March 1, 1913.

my own youth. I beg to state that the political philosophy which I inherited and held was not a string of excuses for privilege and intrigue. The men with whom I worked did not watch the labours and pauses of the national policy with an eye to the financial flutter . . . Liberalism had its faults, but Liberalism was not such slime as the Liberal Press maintains.” He did not envision himself, like Belloc, as an alien critic of a degraded nation, “I am a member of the public,” he said, “I am as daily as anyone else. I am as much everybody as anybody.”¹¹ He also resisted what he saw as attempts “to discredit democracy by representing journalism as the natural literature of democracy.”¹² Chesterton’s articles for the *Daily Herald* and the *British Review* reveal that his disillusionment with the Liberal party and the Liberal press challenged his pious cast of mind. England’s declaration of war with Germany intensified Chesterton’s interior struggle.

The resistant core of Chesterton’s national piety was revealed in his initial response to the outbreak of war. The *Daily Herald* immediately became fiercely pacifist, and Chesterton, just as immediately, broke his connection with that paper as well.¹³ In fact, the war and his pro-war stance gave Chesterton the possibility of writing for the *Daily Mail*, one of the largest of the new mass circulation papers in Britain. In September

¹¹ G.K. Chesterton, “The Exclusiveness of Journalists,” Dec 1913, *The British Review*, vol. IV, no. 3, 321-326.

¹² G. K. Chesterton, “The Tyranny of Bad Journalism,” *Daily Herald*, May 3, 1913.

¹³ G. K. Chesterton, “The Retreat of the Rich,” April 26, 1913, *Daily Herald*.

1914, he was also invited, along with the other leading literary figures of Britain, for a secret meeting of the new War Propaganda Bureau, headed by his old friend-and-foe in the Liberal ministry, C. F. G. Masterman. By November Chesterton was lecturing and writing on behalf of the English war effort, part of a grand “enlistment of the arts” that made World War I the most literary war in history.¹⁴

Chesterton’s response to the war in 1914 was, nevertheless, as idiosyncratic in pro-war literary circles as his response to the Anglo-Boer War had been in the anti-war circles at the turn of the century. Writers generally responded in two ways, depending on their attitude to the pre-war state of the nation. Those who believed that English society was evolving in a progressive direction and leading the development and imperial expansion of rational civilization felt the war as an apocalyptic ending. “The lights are going out all over Europe. We shall not see them lit again in our time,” was the note that echoed through the “end of civilization” literature on the war.¹⁵ Other writers, for whom the social tensions of the Edwardian period loomed larger, saw the war as a just punishment and a necessary purgation for a society that had become lax and luxurious; they tended to blame England’s decadence for the war (or at least for the lack of war preparedness) and hoped that the asceticism and heroism of war would cleanse and revive the nation.¹⁶ Chesterton saw the war as an ending and a new beginning as well, but in ways that were outside the norm.

¹⁴ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined: The First World War and English Culture* (New York, 1990). 25-26, and more generally Chapter 2, “The Arts Enlist.”

¹⁵ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 3. The phrase is attributed to Sir Edward Grey. Hynes covers this reaction to the war in Chapter 1, “Wars Before the War,” 3-10.

¹⁶ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, “The Wars Before the War,” 10-24.

These two views of the war were not incompatible. It was possible to view the loss of the old civilization with a sense of nostalgia and tragedy while believing that it was a necessary loss to prepare the world for a new and better civilization. The war as grand tragedy and the war as grand opportunity for re-creative energy came together for many writers in a single vision of a "Heroic Age," the grandeur of which returned to haunt them after the literary turn towards irony that occurred about half way through the war.¹⁷ Paul Fussell has argued that the ironic mode, which seems to be the "dominating form of modern understanding," originated "largely in the application of mind and memory to the events of the Great War."¹⁸ Writers like Thomas Hardy and Lytton Strachey might have laid the groundwork for seeing "terrible irony as the appropriate interpretive means" for dealing with the war, but it was the overwhelming unanimity of ironic expression by the poets of the trenches that established irony's dominance for post-war literature.¹⁹ The Great War "was a hideous embarrassment to the prevailing Meliorist myth which had dominated the public consciousness for a century; it reversed the Idea of Progress."²⁰ Writers on the left and right supported the war with flights of heroic rhetoric at the beginning, and this led to the emergence of their ironic, self-castigating tone as the war dragged on and became horrible and seemingly unendable. The ironic view of the war then set the stage for the post-war dominance of Bellocian "rash political indignation" on both the left and the right and the kind of ideological polarization that the

¹⁷ Samuel Hynes, *A War Imagined*, 111. See Part III, "The Turning Point," especially Chapter 5 "A Turn of Speech," 109-120.

¹⁸ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 35.

¹⁹ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 3.

²⁰ Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, 8.

post-war generation of writers believed was the dominant characteristic of the twenties and thirties.²¹

Chesterton's vision of the war and its place in history did not conform to this pattern. His sense of irony erupted immediately upon the outbreak of war, and it was comic irony, not the bitter irony of the post-war writing. The war revealed the irony in England's recent past, the disjunction between her true identity and her political and economic development, as well as her international alliances. His comic-heroic vision wore better, too, than the heroic note of other Victorian and Edwardian writers. From the beginning of the war Chesterton's position was that the war itself was poetically fitting as the *denuement* of the comedy of English history, happily ending a long period of self-delusion. Chesterton's wartime propaganda thus swelled and rode the crest of a real turning in English cultural self-identification. The war destroyed the previously dominant emphasis on "Teutonism" and German influences in English culture.²²

He wrote, for example, in a series of articles for the *Daily Mail*, afterwards published as *The Barbarism of Berlin* (1914), that there was nothing incongruous about liberal England allying herself with tsarist Russia despite German propaganda labeling the Russians the "barbarians of the east." Russia, he said, was merely part of the Western community of nations still struggling to free themselves from the remains of an ancient barbarism. However backward their political situation, the Russians had a sense of

²¹ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation*. (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

²² For evidence of this dominance see Stefan Collini, *English Past* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

cultural nationalism that grew out of the Western liberal tradition and therefore included some notion of reciprocity and respect for the patriotism of other nations. "Teutonism," on the other hand, or any racial theory of national identity and destiny was incompatible with "Western" nationalism, and had to be viewed as a "new barbarism," because "the claim of racial superiority is the last and worst of the refusals of reciprocity." Any irony in the wartime alliances, therefore, was the comic irony that the English had been able to resist propaganda from German pseudo-scientists like Harnack and Haeckel, who made racial appeals to the English as "fellow Teutons," or even the domestic influence of political leaders like the Conservative Prime Minister, Lord Salisbury, who was quite a believer in "Teutonism."

England's present alliance with France thus represented the heroic aspect of the war and ended a bitter period for English liberals. England heroically resisted the nineteenth-century tendency towards defining nationhood racially and placed herself on the side of the European tradition of liberalism against racism in the great struggle at hand. "When the Germans get their first genuine glimpse of what modern England is like, they will discover that England has a very broken, belated, and inadequate sense of having an obligation to Europe, but no sort of sense whatever of having any obligation to Teutonism."²³

²³ G. K. Chesterton, *The Barbarism of Berlin* (1914), 92. Europe was not, Chesterton insisted, moving inevitably from religious barbarism towards the scientific, progressive West envisioned by German propagandists. Europe drew life from its Judeo-Christian cultural heritage, especially the idea of a common human nature and the human ability to freely make and fulfill promises (See, "In Defense of Rash Vows," *The Defendant* (1902)). The ideals of the Christian West, rather than the progressive West, ought to be the measure of civilization and barbarism.

In his next attempt at wartime propaganda, *The Crimes of England* (1915), Chesterton elaborated on why England's present alliance with European liberalism against the whole cultural conglomerate that he called "Teutonism" or "Prussianism" was so "broken, belated, and inadequate." In some sense *The Crimes of England* was Chesterton's most Bellocian history of England. He seemed to admit that the war revealed the truth of Belloc's bitterly ironic history of modern England. Yet, the conclusion of the book was that the Bellocian ironies were exploded by England's present alliance with France against England.

Chesterton argued that Teutonism was "not a race, but rather a religion," and that England's "crimes" in the past four centuries of her history could be traced to the growing belief in the existence and prerogatives of an imagined racial group that constituted the basis of the nation-state.²⁴ The three tenets of this new religion of "Teutonism" were a.) the rejection of the democratic vision of the French Revolution, the idea of the citizen "constantly and creatively *altering* the state" by his participation in the government of the community, b.) the encouragement of "irresponsibility of thought within the iron framework of the fixed state," and c.) the belief in a materialist theory of history based on either biological or sociological determinism.²⁵

The English public misconceived the war, Chesterton thought, by failing to recognize it as the continuance of an intra-European cultural and political struggle initiated by the French Revolution. "To say that the Germanies are naturally at war with this idea is merely to respect them and take them seriously: otherwise their war on the

²⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (1915), 133.

²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (1915), Chesterton's emphasis, 134.

French Revolution would be only an ignorant feud.”²⁶ The English public had to come to a full realization that the war was “not a quarrel between England and Germany, but between Europe and Germany,” and England was being called on to take sides, as she had been called on during the Napoleonic Wars. The English public still tended to “[conceive] Germany as at war with something like itself—practical, prosaic, capitalist, competitive,” but, Chesterton hoped, they would come to realize that “Germany was more deeply at war with things quite unlike herself, things from which we also had strayed.”²⁷

Chesterton then gives an encapsulated history of the paths along which England “strayed” from European liberalism since the sixteenth century. “The negative Germanism of the Reformation, its drag towards the north, its quarantine against Latin culture, was in a sense the beginning of the business.” In rejecting the ecclesiastical law of the Roman Catholic Church, the English lost their connection to the Roman tradition of absolute equality before the law. During the Civil War, the English also rejected the French Calvinism of the Presbyterians, a “logical” form of Protestantism that preached the abstract equality of man and was “full of that French capacity for creating official entities which can really act, and have a kind of impersonal personality.” The English adopted instead a form of German Lutheranism, “a Protestantism softer and less abstract” that served the purposes of courtiers and aristocrats. This led the English eventually into the ironic position of supporting the unbelieving Frederick of Prussia as “the Protestant hero” against “the specter of a Continental Crusade,” the united forces of Austria, France,

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (1915), 135.

²⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (1915), 156.

and Russia. “Had that Crusade been universal and whole-hearted,” Chesterton wrote, “the great new precedent of mere force and mere fraud would have been broken; and the whole appalling judgement which is fallen on Christendom would have passed by.”²⁸ The English again allied themselves with Germany during the Napoleonic Wars, which Chesterton characterized as France’s struggle for national freedom, “a duel between the Frenchman and the German; that is, between, the citizen and the barbarian.”²⁹ Last and worst, the English allowed their own traditional polity to be transformed along the lines of the German unitary state and the rule of an enlightened aristocracy by using German mercenaries to suppress the liberal opposition of the Americans, the Irish, and the poor of England. Chesterton, concludes that the new religion of Teutonism triumphed in nineteenth-century England and “the link with our Christian past had been lost.”

The end of the story, however, in the present declaration of war on Germany, is redemptive, allowing Chesterton to turn the story into an ironic comedy. More significantly for understanding Chesterton’s essential whiggishness, he avoids turning the contrast between the bitter truth of England’s descent into Teutonism and her present alliance with liberalism into a story of the death and resurrection of England. Teutonism and liberalism are simultaneous movements rather than stages in English history. At every key moment in the Bellocian narrative that he recites in *The Crimes of England*, Chesterton softens the indictment and sows the seeds of a narrative of continuity.

He laments, for example, the English rejection of Calvinism because “every abstract creed does something for human equality,” but he nevertheless rejoices that

²⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (1915), 43.

²⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (1915), 50-51.

English Christianity was “soft-hearted and not infrequently soft-headed,” because her befuddled theology preserved some of the original Christian conception of liberty.³⁰ He laments England’s support of Prussia against the Catholic nations of Europe, but he is wary of the “expanding and contracting dream” of the Holy Roman Empire.³¹ He laments England’s defeat of France in her imperial war for democratic idealism, but he also points out that Napoleon’s imperialism revealed his hostility to “that very special and occidental form of freedom which we call Nationalism.”³² Lamenting the war with the American colonies, the enclosure of the commons, and the repression of Ireland, he nevertheless says that, in reality, “all true Britons” supported the Americans and that Cobbett and Dickens gave voice to the true liberal democratic spirit of England in the nineteenth century.

So that it does not seem entirely unnatural, in the end, that Englishmen showed themselves more deeply committed to liberal nationalism than to Prussianism and race theory when they “volunteered to avenge Belgium” and finally placed themselves on the side of France in a great European struggle. These suggestions of a whig narrative of continuity are only hints in *The Crimes of England*. The book is undoubtedly marked by Belloc’s enchantment with France and the mission of reuniting and reestablishing medieval “corporate Christendom,” which was destroyed by the defection of Prussia and England. Yet, in these asides, Chesterton resists totalizing Belloc’s narrative of England’s fall from grace and reveals his desire to construct an alternative narrative about England’s

³⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (1915), 40.

³¹ G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (1915), 48-49.

³² G. K. Chesterton, *The Crimes of England* (1915), 49-50.

tenuous preservation of her original liberalism. In the final analysis, Chestertonian historical piety shines through Bellocian historical irony and in his narrative “ordinary Englishness” survives through the mistaken centuries.

Chesterton’s *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* reveal, perhaps best of all his wartime propaganda, the kind of re-evaluation of history that he believed the war allowed for. The book attempted to explain the nature and basis of the new alliance between Italy and England by appealing to the popular historic memories of Garibaldi, who had attained heroic status during his visit to England in the 1850s. A Garibaldian, Chesterton said, was “a good middle type of the Latins, a Liberal but a Catholic, an artist but a soldier,” and could thus serve as a reliable ally for the kind of liberal-orthodox Englishman Chesterton had envisioned in his literary criticism and religious controversy.³³ An Englishman would also find common ground with a Garibaldian in being “a democrat and a citizen of Europe.”³⁴ They would find common ground in comparing the controversies that marked their national histories, “the quarrel which (very tragically I think) has for some years cloven the Christian from the Liberal ideal.”³⁵

It would ill become me, in whose country there is neither such clear doctrine nor such combative democracy, to suppose it can be easy for any of you to close up such sacred wounds [won in the battles between Catholic and Jacobin, clergy and republican] . . . And yet there is something, the mere sight of which should lock them both in an instant alliance. They have only to look northward and behold the third thing, which thinks it is superior to both . . . Neither religion at its worst nor republicanism at its worst ever offered the coarse insult to all mankind that

³³ G. K. Chesterton, *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* (London: Methuen, 1915), 27.

³⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* (1915), 10

³⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* (1915), 43.

is offered by this new and naked universal monarchy [of race] . . . In citizen and Christian sinner there has always been something which your ancestors called *Verecundia*, which is at once humility and dignity.³⁶

Italy's joining the war against Germany signified for Chesterton a culmination of her history, without the element of ironic turning that England's war with Germany held for him, because he saw in Italy's past the strength of both of the traditions he believed made for a "faith in freedom.

Chesterton's description of the internal division and essential unity in the Italian's national identity in his *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* served as a prism through which he saw the division and essential unity of English national identity. In 1914, he believed, England had been united against Prussianism by a "universal flash of faith—or if you will suspicion." "For the first time, perhaps, what we call the United Kingdom entirely deserves its name. There has been nothing like such unanimity within an Englishman's recollection." The Napoleonic wars, the Crimean war, the Boer war, had caused more internal controversy than the war with Germany.

What was it that has made the British peoples thus defer not only their artificial parade of party politics, but their real social and moral complaints and demands? What is it that has united all of us against the Prussian, as against a mad dog? It is the presence of a certain spirit, as unmistakable as a pungent smell . . . We are fighting to prevent a German future for Europe. We think it would be narrower, nastier, less sane, less capable of liberty and laughter, than any of the worst parts of the European past.³⁷

The war revealed a European tradition underlying divisions between nations, classes, and parties. The war revealed a democratic tradition of allegiance to "liberty and laughter" flowing from a belief in a common human nature. Against the Germans, who saw no

³⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* (1915), 43-44, 44, 45, 46.

³⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* (1915), 9, 10, 11-12, 13.

common humanity under the myth of race, this European tradition upheld the belief that every man was “as an Italian more than Italian, as Englishman more than Englishman.”³⁸

³⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* (1915), 17.

Chapter 9: G. K. Chesterton's *A Short History of England* (1917)

Chesterton best resolved the struggle between his allegiance to England as a liberal nation and his incorporation of Belloc's radical history in his last and longest wartime book, *A Short History of England* (1917). It was a great publishing success and was widely and enthusiastically reviewed. The reviews glowed with praise for Chesterton's achievement of a truly patriotic history: "He makes English history a living force,"¹ "as exciting as a Le Queux novel and far more amusing than *Punch*,"² "a magnificent oration on the English people, their qualities, vices, misfortunes, and blunders," "an honest, hot-headed, violent book, which is well among the finest things he has ever done,"³ "[t]here is no doubt as to its inspiration in the 'love and praise of England,'"⁴ "an essay on the English which has all the fire and finish of a poem . . . [Green] made the English nation the subject of his book, while Mr. Chesterton makes it his hero. The informing passion . . . of the book is a love of England, far transcending that which is manifested by most of the patriotic poets,"⁵ "a very virile and entrancing work, which does Mr. Chesterton honour and cannot but do good to all men," a "brilliant sketch" in which "Mr. Chesterton's genius reaches perhaps the top note . . . On

¹ *Illustrated London News*, November 17, 1917.

² *London Mail*, November 2, 1917.

³ "Clio Enthusiastic," *Westminster Gazette*, October 27, 1917.

⁴ *Observer*, October 28, 1917.

⁵ Edward Shanks, *New Statesman*, October 27, 1917.

specifically English things the author has no rival.”⁶ The consensus was that Chesterton had achieved a genuinely popular history, which would supplant J. R. Green’s and would influence popular histories for generations.

Its Catholic bias and paradoxes, its nimble fantasy and glowing faith in all that is incredulous and legendary and up-side-down is only a sort of patina that covers the substance of his tale. Mr. Chesterton writes of Englishmen, with their deepest affections and strongest traditions. He believes in the sound instinct of the people.⁷

One reviewer even declared that because of his new history Chesterton would be referred to by future generations as the “sage of Fleet Street” or the “Sage of Beaconsfield.” He had achieved “the sort of history, as he might claim, that makes history.”⁸

The book is an unusual example of a popular history, full of analogy and allusion. It assumes a knowledge of chronology, personalities, and events in a way that bespeaks a confidence in the audience and their common inheritance of historical understanding generally associated with the Victorian moralists rather with than twentieth-century historians.⁹ Each chapter is an interpretative essay on a period or episode that creates a sense of a conversation with other interpreters of the past. Chesterton’s style of writing

⁶ *English Review*, February 1918.

⁷ ‘Nourouz,’ “History without Tears: Merrie England and the Mob,” *National News*, December 2, 1918.

⁸ *Daily Chronicle*, October 29, 1917. E. Brett Young, *Liverpool Courier*, November 1, 1917; *Globe*, October 25, 1917.

⁹ Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists*. One sees something of this same kind of assumption of historical literacy in Sellar and Yeatman’s *1066 and All That* (1930) and even in the *Monty Python* shows.

history validated the whiggish use of history as a rhetorical tool in defining national identity even as it challenged elements of the Whig narrative.

In *A Short History of England* Chesterton distanced himself further from Belloc's radical history of post-Reformation of England and came around to the Whig historiographical project of providing a geneology of liberal England. At the same time, he repudiated versions of Whig history that appealed to "the sacred name of Progress," versions which survived into the twentieth century in the work of George Trevelyan and Winston Churchill.¹⁰ Chesterton argues in the *Short History* that what there is of liberalism in England is the fruit of her pre-Reformation Christian heritage and that the perversity of the progressive Whig historians is that they consistently miss this fact.

Reviewers recognized that Chesterton's radical history connected with the Whig history at key points in the narrative, providing reinterpretations but also sympathetic readings of the more familiar heroic narrative. Chesterton's alternative history built on a previous narrative of English history acquired by "any intelligent schoolboy," and he knew and accepted "the importance of legend, as revealing the mind of the common people."¹¹ The *Glasgow Herald*, which considered Chesterton "blinded by prejudice" towards Rome, commended him for his even-handed enthusiasm for the figures of English history. "The great whom he admires are worthily portrayed, and his appreciations . . . reveal . . . the intensity of his patriotic feeling."¹² The *Nation* too, in

¹⁰ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996).

¹¹ *Church Times*, November 9, 1917.

¹² *Glasgow Herald*, October 25, 1917.

spite of complaining that doctrinaire, sage and poet had become unfortunately entangled in Chesterton's writing, resulting in "a tragic fable or romance of the downfall of liberty in England" rather than a patriotic hymn, declared Chesterton "a marvelous rhetorician doing the honours of prose to his enemies. He is forever laying down the whip and inviting the criminals to take their seats while he paints gorgeous portraits of them in all the colors of the rainbow."¹³ The *Saturday Review*, which objected to Chesterton's "Catholic view of history," nevertheless wrote, "We love Mr. Chesterton, we could 'hug him' for his real understanding of and sympathy with the rhetoric and the aristocracy of the eighteenth century."¹⁴ One reviewer put it succinctly: "Mr. Chesterton's merit is that he tries to understand even unsympathetic things; aristocratic Whigs, for example, and even Puritans." The *New Statesman* agreed that "it is curious to notice how often Mr. Chesterton can accept statements of historians and even their interpretations of particular events."

It is in the cast which he gives to the whole that he differs from them; and this difference consists in little more than the assertion that English freedom has never broadened down from precedent to precedent . . . Mr. Chesterton is unable to accept the placid belief of most historians that England has been getting better and better since the first syllable of recorded time; and here the poet is at least as much entitled to his opinion as the scholar.¹⁵

Chesterton preserved the enshrined details while reshaping the national history on the broadest scale.

¹³ *Nation*, November 10, 1917.

¹⁴ *Saturday Review*, November 17, 1917.

¹⁵ Edward Shanks, *New Statesman*, October 27, 1917.

England, he believes, was civilized by Rome and brought into the structure of Roman life, of which modern Europe is but a consequent growth . . . She was reconquered by that later transformation of the Roman energy which we call the Catholic Church and brought definitely again into the European orbit by the Normans, who, whatever their blood, were certainly French in manners and mind . . . England became a part of Christendom. This thesis, as Mr. Chesterton presents it, is a fairly complete reversal of what it usually taught in schools.

While they could find “no reasonable compromise between the Chestertonian and the official view of English history,” readers nevertheless found it fitting that the book was published on “the anniversary of the Battle of Trafalgar and the death of Nelson.”¹⁶ They embraced Chesterton’s schoolboy enthusiasm for the Victorian whig narrative even tinged when it was tinged with his Edwardian radicalism. “The best thing about Chesterton’s *Short History of England* is its entirely sincere and whole-hearted love of England and its people.”¹⁷

In the introduction to the book, Chesterton claims to have written a national history to replace and surpass J. R. Green’s *Short History of the English People*. The national subject of Green’s history is “Puritan England” and the argument of Chesterton’s book is that England never was Puritan. Green derived his characterization of modern England as a “Protestant nation” from James Froude who abandoned the older Whig protagonists, the constitution and the Parliament. Chesterton’s story does not pit “Puritan England” against either a golden (or dark) age of Catholic England or an idealized (or demonized) continental Christendom. He argues that England neither fell nor progressed

¹⁶ E. Brett Young, *Liverpool Courier*, November 1, 1917; *Public Opinion*, October 26, 1917; *Sheffield Telegraph*, November 29, 1917 (review accompanied by a picture of Nelson).

¹⁷ *Yorkshire Post*, December 19, 1917.

from her position as a Catholic nation within the European community of nations. He returns to his earlier literary history at crucial moments of the narrative, refusing to give economic factors priority and maintaining his first faith in the whiggish continuity of English liberalism. The result was what one reviewer called “an essay on the English which has all the fire and finish of a poem” because Chesterton evaded the trap into which both the revisionist historians and the earlier generations of Whig historians, particularly J. R. Green, had fallen: they “could not get away from the belief that political and economic factors were the most important things in life, which is a very partial way of approaching the spirit of a people.”¹⁸

Chesterton’s first chapters set the origin and formation of Englishness in England’s beginnings as a Roman province under the “double rule” of the pagan civilization and the Christian religion and in the midst of the tensions between the two. “The important thing about France and England is not that they have Roman remains,” Chesterton says, “They are Roman remains.”¹⁹ Rome had an equivocal meaning by the time of England’s incorporation into the Empire. On the one hand Rome represented the classical republican ideal. “Pre-Christian Rome,” Chesterton says, “was regarded as something mystical for long afterwards by all European men,” because the attempt at

¹⁸ Edward Shanks, October 27, 1917 *New Statesman*.

¹⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (1917), 18. “In the barbarous twilight of history,” before one can know with certainty “whether the Britons . . . were Iberian or Cymric or Teutonic,” one finds that “they were Roman,” 17. Chesterton thus dismisses Green’s racial speculations about Englishness, as he does throughout the book.

civic republicanism was considered “the utmost Man had done.”²⁰ The Roman civic ideal was embodied in the English cities of York, Chester, and London, “older than counties, older even than countries,” he says. But Roman government had already proven itself liable to over-reaching its bounds and becoming corrupt. The conquest of far-off England and the English slaves sold in Roman slave-markets were signs that “the Roman ideal of a small civic community . . . was already over-extended.” England became a Roman province even as Christianity came condemning the corruption of pagan Rome and preaching the doctrine of the original fall and supernatural redemption of nature, suggesting that even a good man was not good enough and “even good government was not good enough.” The civic republicanism of the Romans needed to be redeemed, or, at least, its fallibility and corruptibility acknowledged and the extension of its power limited. As the power of Rome began to recede, he says, England took her essential character from this Christian return to the “loose localism” of the Roman ideal. Chesterton elsewhere described Christian England as the “advance guard of that immense revolt and rout which fled from the failure of the Pagan Empire.”²¹ England, being the most distant province, remained relatively untouched by the alternative vision that haunted medieval and modern Europeans, Constantine’s Holy Roman Empire, a sanctification of the pagan reality of emperor and empire rather than the pagan ideal of civic republicanism. England, being the furthest and last-born province of the dying empire, thus had a unique historic role in European history, which Chesterton

²⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (1917), 20.

²¹ Chesterton, “An Agnostic Establishment,” *Nation*, May 16, 1908.

metaphorically summarizes by saying she that “once had the highly poetic privilege of being the end of the world.”²²

Chesterton justifies giving so much importance to England’s historic origins as a Roman Province, insisting that it represents not a lost past but an ever-present spirit, by evoking the legendary significance for the English of Alfred the Great and Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Alfred’s unification of the various races of the British isles behind the standard of Christianity reveals the endurance of the Roman-Christian ideals and Arthurian romance “established Britain for after centuries as a country with a chivalrous past.”²³ The true character of Alfred’s resistance of the barbarians, Chesterton says, was to be found in his Christian liberalism, in the “love of a valley or a village, a site or a family . . . passions rooted in locality, special emotions about sea-folk or mountain-folk.”²⁴ Alfred’s Christianity, he says, was a vessel for the classical ideal of local liberty: “For the Pope was what was left of the Empire; and the Empire what was left of the Republic.”²⁵ He suggests that the Round Table of the Arthurian legend also placed the Roman ideal of republican government at the heart of ideal Englishness, while

²² G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (1917), 14. Same idea as in *Ballad*, “For the of the world was long ago-- / And we all dwell today / As children of some second birth, / Like a strange people left on earth / After a judgement day.”

²³ G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (1917), 38.

²⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *A Short History of England* (1917), 42-43. “But of a cause like that of the Celts or Teutons . . . there was little or nothing” (42-43) “The orthodox modern history, notably Green, remarks on the singularity of Britain in being alone of all Roman provinces wholly cleared and re-peopled by a Germanic race” (43). Chesterton has nothing but scorn for “the learned who grope about in the darkness of unrecorded epochs for the roots of their favourite race or races” (40).

²⁵ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 31.

the tradition that the most childlike knight was the strongest candidate for finding the Holy Grail pointed to the Christian leveling and inversion of the pagan standards of judging human worth.

Many reviewers, overlooking the complexity of Chesterton's vision England's Roman-Christian heritage, merely identified the Bellocian thesis embedded in Chesterton's narrative at this point—"Britain was directly Roman for fully 400 hundred years; longer than she has been Protestant and very much longer than she has been industrial"—which led some to dismiss it as "a historical pamphlet embellishing Belloc's Servile State theories."²⁶ One reviewer wrote, "It is irrelevant, perhaps, to enquire whence Mr. Chesterton has derived his particular views on English history. It would be easy enough to point to Mr. Belloc, and behind him to Lingard and Fustel de Coulanges."²⁷ "Mr. Chesterton does not claim to have read any original documents. Probably Mr. Belloc, his twin medievalist, has done all the reading in that line that the case requires."²⁸ "He has learnt from his friend Belloc that Rome is what matters, that European civilization is essentially Latin."²⁹ A note of warning runs through these reviews against the "powerful and disturbing influence of Mr. Hilaire Belloc."³⁰

²⁶ *Public Opinion*, October 26, 1917. *Aberdeen Free Press*, December 6, 1917. Two papers referred to Chesterton as a Bolshevick. *Times Literary Supplement*, November 22, 1917; "Twinkle Twinkle Little Star," *Morning Post*, October 26, 1917. Chesterton had produced a "Bolshevik pamphlet," which "under the pretence of being a history of England, would give a show of historical validity to the claims of 'Labour.'" *Daily Telegraph*, November 2, 1917: "Like Mr. Belloc, [Chesterton identifies] the 'sociological drift' carrying the people into 'the servile state.'"

²⁷ Edward Shanks, *New Statesman*, October 27, 1917.

²⁸ *Liverpool Post*, October 18, 1917.

²⁹ *Church Times*, November 9, 1917.

Chesterton however had accomplished a whiggish rather than Tory radical purpose with his emphasis on England's days as a Roman province. Because of his emphasis on the continuity of Roman-Christian culture through the Anglo-Saxon period, the Norman invasion of 1066 does not present a problem of discontinuity in Chesterton's narrative. He foregrounds St. Edward the Confessor as the symbol of the essential continuity of England before and after the Norman invasion,³¹ granting the Norman victors their claim to him as an ancestral hero.³² "The Norman is a gate . . . and what entered by that gate was civilization," but it was essentially the same civilization with the same internal tension and dynamic that already existed in pre-Norman Britain.³³ William of Normandy "was what Julius Caesar was, what St. Augustine was: he was the ambassador of Europe to Britain."³⁴ The Normans merely enhanced a link to European Christendom that already existed. The great Norman invasion was merely one of the "three great southern visitations which civilised these islands." Each brought with them

³⁰ *School World*, December 1917.

³¹ Chesterton is wary of using St. Edward, aware that he has been used by Stuarts and Jacobite historians to signal support for a theory of sacred kingship; "the reader may be surprised at the disproportionate importance given to the name which stands first in the title of this chapter," he says (54).

³² The figure of St. Edward reveals the falsity of narratives that highlight race, and say that the "Anglo-Saxons" were allegedly defeated by the Normans, the subjugation of a Teutonic to a Latin race. But, Chesterton says, if one does not try to force any conclusion to the "indeterminate debate touching the dim races that mixed without record in that dim epoch," one must see that both sides were a mixture of Scandinavian and Latin heritage and that the struggle was not a racial struggle.

³³ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 61.

³⁴ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 62.

this same dynamic: the Roman ideal of the *civus* was followed by St. Augustine's monastic ideal which was followed by the "lively localism" of Norman feudalism.³⁵ Modern men, "bankrupt of the corporate imagination," Chesterton says, find it difficult to envision the local communitarianism of medieval England, but Christian culture was "full of local affections" and guarded the "mystery of locality" with pilgrimages and local patron saints. This "freer element in Feudalism" resisted the urge towards centralization, imperialism, and utopianism. "The feudal undergrowth prevented even a full attempt to build the *Civitas Dei*, or ideal medieval state." For Chesterton the medieval barons resisting King John were not guardians of the ancient Anglo-Saxon constitution against European corruptions. Liberalism was the heritage of Republican Rome, revived by Christianity, resisting the traditions of pagan Rome.

Chesterton claims that "the real quarrel" in "Age of the Crusades," internal and external, was between a culture of localism and an imperial culture. The era was, Chesterton says, both a time of the "blossoming of our local patriotisms," when "the Guilds, the democratic systems of the time, often owed their increasing power to corporate fighting for the Cross," and a rebirth of the pagan dream of unity.³⁶ The struggle with Islam was "the fire-baptism of the young nations" but it renewed the impetus for a "corporate Christendom" and a Europe that was "nearly one nation." This was the "springtime of nationalism" but the "autumn of medieval society," Chesterton

³⁵ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 44.

³⁶ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 84.

says.³⁷ Nevertheless, nationalism, he suggests, became the new line of defense against imperial ambition behind which localism took up its age-old struggle: “If this great and strange development,” nationalism, “be not enduring, the point is that it is felt to be enduring,” because national piety grew organically out of the older piety of local community, so that men’s “relation to their native land has become not contractual but sacramental.”³⁸ “Patriotism is not mere citizenship . . . It is hard to give a definition of loyalty, but perhaps we come near it if we call it the thing which operates where obligation is felt to be unlimited.”³⁹ Even if the nationalism of France and England were later tinged with “that heresy of tribal pride that took even heavier hold upon the Germans,” “even if their nationalism was of a kind that has ultimately proved perilous to the comity of nations, it was still nationalism.” And nationalism, Chesterton insists, is fundamentally part of the liberal impulse in history.⁴⁰

³⁷ This tension presented itself to the English in “The Problem of the Plantagenets.” Henry of Anjou inherited the English throne and brought with him “a refreshment of . . . the idea in the Roman Law of something impersonal and omnipresent,” the idea of a unitary state based on the power of the law. St. Thomas of Canterbury, as Chesterton sees him, was a martyr of true English liberalism in resisting “the Angevin ideal of the King’s justice,” and in “the horror of Christendom, the canonization of the victim and the public penance of the tyrant,” the Angevin ideal received a great blow in England. But the Plantagenet kings continued to assert their dominance within the national community and their imperial claims to the Scottish and French thrones and in these struggles the nations “grew corporate.”

³⁸ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 136.

³⁹ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 136.

⁴⁰ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 194.

Chesterton therefore also portrays the Reformation as one more episode in the liberal dynamic of Englishness. He seems to deny that the religious lines correlate in any meaningful way to define the heroes and villains of the story and to deny that the Reformation was any significant discontinuity in England's past.

The problem of the Plantagenets continued in the Tudors and Stuarts. The English needed to be constantly vigilant against the Angevin ideal and the development of a modern unitary state that threatened English liberties. The Henrician Reformation was the fruit of "England of the Renaissance; England passing from medieval to modern," another phase in the Plantagenet-Tudor king's striving towards "the more modern doctrine of the divine right of kings, widely different from the medieval one," which included "the supremacy of the King over the English national Church" and triumphed in the seventeenth century with the sounding of "the new note of modern militarism."⁴¹

But while the king's attempt to usher in "a strong national monarchy" began the Reformation, "the tide which thus burst through the breach and overwhelmed the King as well as the Church was the revolt of the rich, and especially of the new rich." After the Wars of the Roses the new national aristocracy replaced the local medieval barons; this was a necessary evil, Chesterton suggests, because this new powerful aristocracy would be needed to curb the power of the king. "The medieval lord had been, by comparison, a coarse fellow; he had merely lived in the largest kind of farm-house after the fashion of the largest kind of farmer." Thomas More was a part of the new aristocracy, a Renaissance man who put his utopian dreams of "a new and more rationalist civilization" at the service of a Renaissance state led by a Renaissance King. More probably "shared

⁴¹ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 167.

some of the excesses and errors of taste which inevitably infected the splendid intellectualism of the reaction against the Middle Ages,” Chesterton says, but he credits him (and perhaps his class) with having the moral sense to see that the rationalizing passion had its inhuman side. More’s phrase, “Sheep are eating men,” sums up the transition from “an intensive type of agriculture . . . to a very extensive type of pasture.” “Great spaces of England which had hitherto been cut up into the commonwealth of a number of farmers were being laid under the sovereignty of a solitary shepherd.” In the dissolution of the monasteries and the beginning of enclosure, the struggle of a new “strong national monarchy” against “a new and abnormally powerful aristocracy” eventually succeeded in “destroying the institutions of the poor.”⁴² More’s belated recognition of the direction the Renaissance King was taking, his final resistance, and martyrdom makes him a liberal hero in Chesterton’s narrative, even a martyr to the remnants of liberalism preserved by the new aristocracy’s fight against despotism. Chesterton resists creating any neat parallel between the orthodox or reformed religion and liberalism and despotism in this account. “How much the theological theories of the time had to do with it,” he says, “is a perfectly fair matter for difference of opinion.”⁴³ This is surprising for a supposed disciple of Belloc.

The Whig and Radical narratives took the reign of Elizabeth and the defeat of the Spanish Armada to be central events in English history. In the progressive-Whig

⁴² Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 179.

⁴³ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 178.

tradition, it represented the beginnings of modern liberty, linked, especially in Froude and Green, to the triumph of Protestantism over Catholic despotism and the origins of England's commercial and imperial character. For Belloc the victory for Elizabethan England represented England's tragic rejection of Catholicism and the consolidation of the Whig aristocracy's gains in power and wealth at the expense of the Church, the destruction of the liberal tradition of a balance of powers in society. Chesterton, in his treatment of the Elizabethan era, separates the religious struggle from the narrative of a continuous liberal spirit that gives life to the nation. England's "religious schism," Chesterton wrote, merely obscured the political rights and wrongs of the national and international situation.⁴⁴ Saying that "popular prejudice is generally more worthy of study than scholarly sophistry," he accepts the popular tradition which makes Mary Tudor a villain and Elizabeth the heroine of the national history, without making the story one of the triumph of Protestantism over Catholicism.

Mary's rule revealed the extent to which the rival of the new Protestant regime was to be an equally modern Catholic regime. "What made the difference was that even in this Catholic reign the property of the Catholic Church was not restored."⁴⁵ Neither Mary nor Elizabeth managed to reverse the process by which localism yielded to nationalism. Chesterton argues that the issue between Mary and Elizabeth was not a Catholic regime versus a Protestant one, a medieval or liberal regime versus a modern

⁴⁴ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 188-189. The dangerous precedent of using religious justifications for wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, he says, introduced "the idea of *natural* wars not arising from a special quarrel but from the nature of the people quarrelling." There arose the idea of inevitable struggles in an evolutionary process, "which," he suggested, "modern science applies to racial wars."

⁴⁵ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 181.

and despotic one. The real issue between Mary and Elizabeth was national independence. Mary, the daughter of a Spanish queen, was “behind the times” in continuing to consider France the national enemy and Habsburg Spain the national ally. With her outdated international vision, she would have surrendered England to the Holy Roman Empire in hopes of recovering Calais.⁴⁶ “With no particular anti-national intention, Mary nevertheless got herself into an anti-national position towards the most tremendous international problem of her people.”

In light of Mary’s mistake, Chesterton approves of Elizabeth’s heroic status in traditional national histories. She preserved England from continental overlordship and became a figurehead of Liberal England. For Chesterton Elizabeth was a Little Englander, a new Alfred. The progressive Whig historians took the Elizabethan navy as a point of origin in an evolutionary history culminating in the ever-expanding British commercial empire. Chesterton objects to “wooden cliches about the birth of the British Empire and the spacious days of Queen Elizabeth” as contradicting “the crucial truth” of the episode, which was that England was a small nation fighting against a vast empire. Even Shakespeare, “the great poet of the spacious days,” Chesterton says, “does not praise [England] as spacious, but only as small, like a jewel.”⁴⁷ “The vision of universal expansion” that became associated with Britain in the eighteenth century would never be as “vivid and vital” a part of English identity as this earlier ideal of local liberty.⁴⁸ “Anti-

⁴⁶ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 182.

⁴⁷ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 184.

⁴⁸ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 184.

Imperialism” was the force that wrought England as a nation, just as Scottish and French opposition to the medieval English kings had brought about their sense of national identity. “England achieved, at the beginning of her modern history, that one thing human imagination will always find heroic—the story of a small nationality.”⁴⁹

Evoking the Little England patriotism of the Boer War period, Chesterton says that “the business of the Armada” was to Elizabethan England “what Bannockburn was to the Scots, or Majuba to the Boers.”⁵⁰ Far from regretting the disintegration of “corporate Christendom,” he admires England for heroically resisting the Habsburg’s new “crusade,” because it represented “Imperialism in its complete and colossal sense, a thing unthinkable since Rome.” “It is only when we realise that the English were, by comparison, as dingy, as undeveloped, as petty and provincial as Boers, that we can appreciate the height of their defiance or the splendour of their escape.”⁵¹ Chesterton wanted “to stamp the contrast in an imperishable image” to remind his readers of their Little England origins and the defeat of the Armada provided him with the image. “The election of the English” as a nation was “announced in the stormy oracles of sea and air.” The Spanish empire’s power “seemed to cover the sea with a navy like the legendary navy of Xerxes.” An empire of mythic proportions “bore down on the doomed island with the weight and solemnity of a day of judgement; sailors or pirates struck at it with small ships staggering under large cannon, fought it with mere masses of flaming

⁴⁹ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 184.

⁵⁰ Belloc on the other hand, berates Richelieu for placing French nationalism before the unity of Christendom in the Thirty Years War.

⁵¹ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 184.

rubbish, and in that last hour of grapple a great storm arose out of the sea and swept round the island, and the gigantic fleet was seen no more. The uncanny completeness and abrupt silence that swallowed this prodigy touched a nerve that has never ceased to vibrate.”⁵² For Chesterton the defeat of the Spanish Armada was the mythic continuation of the old Roman-Christian national dynamic tending towards the defense of local liberties and small nations, and less of a myth of origin.

During the seventeenth-century period, Chesterton proclaims the Whig aristocracy bearers of the medieval ideal of liberal localism and applauds the “anti-despotic aspects of the campaign against the Stuarts.”⁵³ Chesterton imagines both the Puritans and the Stuarts as representatives of the modern rationalizing and centralizing tendency and portrays both as foreign importations into England. The Stuarts represented modern absolutism as seen on the continent, the flowering of the spirit of the Renaissance. “It was more logical, and in many ways more equal and even equitable than the English oligarchy, but it really became a tyranny in case of rebellion or even resistance. There were none of the rough English safeguards of juries and good customs of the old common law.”⁵⁴ The Puritan doctrine also because idealized “individual reason, cut loose from instinct as well as tradition,” and in Cromwell it produced its own

⁵² Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 185.

⁵³ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 204. In other words, he is defending the old Whig narrative that Burrow says Hume had exploded, that had become “empirically untenable” after Hume.

⁵⁴ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 204-205.

version of absolutism.⁵⁵ “True Puritanism was rather a Scotch than an English thing,” he says. And he also points to the prevalence of Jansenism on the continent as evidence that “this terrible trend was not confined even to Protestant countries; some great Romanists doubtfully followed it until stopped by Rome. It was the spirit of the age.”

Chesterton dismisses the specifically anti-Catholic nature of the English Glorious Revolution and suggests that, insofar as it touched matters of religion, the struggle was between traditional piety and modern secular rationalism rather than between Protestantism and Catholicism. The “practicing communion of the nation” was what he calls the “Catholic continuity of Anglicanism.”⁵⁶ It might have only been “the slow extirpation of Catholicism,” he admits, but it significantly tempered the Protestantism of the English Church. The rule of this *via media* made it “very hard now to guess the proportion of Protestantism” in seventeenth century England. “There is no doubt about its presence, especially its presence in centres of importance like London. By the time of Charles II, after the purge of the Puritan Terror, it had become something at least more inherent and human than the mere exclusiveness of Calvinist creeds or the craft of Tudor nobles.”⁵⁷ “The debate about the Church of England, then as now... is not a debate about what an institution ought to do, or whether that institution ought to alter, but about what that institution actually is. One party, then as now, only cared for it because it was Catholic, and the other only cared for it because it was Protestant... Masses of common

⁵⁵ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 196-197.

⁵⁶ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 215.

⁵⁷ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 213.

people loved the Church of England without having even decided what it was.”⁵⁸ “The national church was then at least really national, in a fashion that was emotionally vivid though intellectually vague.”⁵⁹ The intellectual tradition of continental Catholicism, locked in a theological struggle with Jansenism, seemed as foreign to this national tradition as the Calvinism of the Puritans. “There is something appalling about abstract speculations to many Englishmen; and the abstract speculations of Jesuits like Suarez dealt with extreme democracy and things undreamed of here.”⁶⁰ The “Stuart scheme of toleration” seemed to the English “as vast and empty as atheism.” “The cosy English compromise shuddered” to see the “weary and humourous mind of Charles II” in alliance with “the subtle and detached spirit of William Penn” proposing philosophic toleration.

The revolution, then, cleared of its religious coloring, can be clearly seen as a struggle of a small nation for local liberty against the imperial state at home and imperial invasion from abroad. “The aristocrats to whom power passed finally at the Revolution were already ceasing to have any supernatural faith in Protestantism as against Catholicism; but they had a very natural faith in England as against France; and even, in a certain sense, in English institutions as against French institutions.”⁶¹ “The Whigs were . . . defending some remains of medieval liberty.” “Feudalism had involved a localism not without liberal elements, which lingered in the aristocratic system. Those who loved such things might well be alarmed at the Leviathan of the State, which for Hobbes was a single

⁵⁸ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 214.

⁵⁹ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 214.

⁶⁰ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 215.

⁶¹ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 217-218.

monster and for France a single man.”⁶² In their struggle against France, Chesterton acknowledges the Whigs’ right to the status of national heroes: “In this matter, in short, it is probable enough that the aristocrats were popular as patriots will always be popular.”⁶³ The Whigs, “the most unmedieval of mankind, could yet boast about some medieval liberties, Magna Charta, the Parliament and the Jury, so they could appeal to a true medieval legend in the matter of a war with France.”⁶⁴ There was some truth to their rhetorical use of history to create a sense of national continuity.⁶⁵

The next two chapters of the *Short History*, “The War with the Great Republics” and “Aristocracy and Its Discontents” are a kind of side skirmish, guarding the old Whig narrative from the incursions of the Tory Radical narrative in which the nation stands historically in the wrong, fighting against her own liberal ideals. In these chapters

⁶² Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 205.

⁶³ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 218.

⁶⁴ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 217-218.

⁶⁵ Tory Radicalism, in Chesterton’s narrative never constitutes a real rival to Whig political philosophy because it was, Chesterton points out, only a version of the triumphant Whig ideals of the 1688 revolution. “Bolingbroke stands for a whole body of conviction which bulked very large in English history, but which with the recent winding of the course of history has gone out of sight,” the conviction that a balance of powers in the state was better than a unified and efficient state (224); it was “a wholly rational theory of Jacobitism,” the idea that . . . even a bad king is a good thing, for his oppression weakens the nobility and relieves the pressure on the populace” (225). “In the time of Queen Anne it was probably the opinion of the majority of people in England” (224). This Patriot-Whig or Tory-Radical “intellectual brotherhood-in-arms” lived on especially in the great English literature of the eighteenth century, in the writing of Samuel Johnson, Goldsmith, and Swift. Eighteenth-century Tory Radicalism was a “living and logical faith in a popular monarchy,” with no sympathy for the Renaissance unitary state under the divine right of the king.

Chesterton does his best to incorporate the full Bellocian indictment of the Whig aristocracy, with a cameo role given to Cobbett, who saw “the Reformation as the root of both squirarchy and industrialism, and called on the people to break away from both.” In Belloc’s narrative, the English Whigs betrayed their true disdain for the old English liberalism by going to war with the American colonies and the French Republic and by allowing the enclosure of common land. “When republicanism really entered the world,” Chesterton says, the English Whigs “instantly waged two great wars with it . . . America and France revealed the real nature of the English Parliament.”⁶⁶ The doctrine of human equality, “stated by Rousseau in the *Contrat Social*, and by Jefferson in *The Declaration of Independence*,” had, Chesterton says, “long underlain all Christianity.”⁶⁷ But “the world had wandered further and further from these truisms, and nobody in the world was further from them than the great English aristocrats . . . whose whole romance and religion now consisted of the importance of the gentleman.”⁶⁸ One can hear the theme of *The Crimes of England* returning, the idea that England fell from grace when she allowed herself to be Germanized, when Chesterton argues that the American colonists were fighting “not with a dead monarchy, but with a living aristocracy” that was beginning to take the reins of a modern unitary state modeled on Prussia’s enlightened despotism.

⁶⁶ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 232.

⁶⁷ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 237. As he put it, “When we say that all pennies are equal, we . . . mean that they coins of a certain value, twelve of which go to make a shilling. It may be put symbolically, and even mystically, by saying that they all bear the image of the King. And, though the most mystical, it is also the most practical summary of human equality that all men bear the image of the King of Kings.”

⁶⁸ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 237-238.

“The popular tradition, especially in America, has pictured it primarily as a duel of George III and George Washington; and, as we have noticed more than once, such pictures though figurative are seldom false. King George’s head... stood for that Anglo-German alliance which, at a very much later time in history, was to turn into the world-old Teutonic Race.”⁶⁹

In this chapter, the Whig aristocracy and Parliament itself are in danger of becoming the villains of the narrative. Chesterton points out the irony that “all through the great Whig speeches about liberty, all through the great Tory speeches about patriotism, through the period of Wandewash and Plassy, through the period of Trafalgar and Waterloo, one process was steadily going on in the central senate of the nation. Parliament was passing bill after bill for the enclosure, by the great landlords, of such of the common lands as had survived out of the great communal system of the Middle Ages.”⁷⁰ The irony of English history was that the English squires “remained human, and yet ruined humanity all around them.”⁷¹

Their own ideal, nay their own reality of life, was really more generous and genial than the stiff savagery of Puritan captains and Prussian nobles; but the land withered under their smile as under an alien frown. Being still English, they were still in their way good-natured; but their position was false, and a false position forces the good-natured into brutality. The French Revolution was the challenge that really revealed to the Whigs that they must make up their minds to be really democrats or admit that they were really aristocrats. They decided, as in the case of their philosophic exponent Burke, to be really aristocrats.⁷²

⁶⁹ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 235.

⁷⁰ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 249.

⁷¹ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 250.

⁷² Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 250.

To a certain extent, Chesterton manages to avoid completely unbalancing the Whig patriotic narrative by allowing the English liberal political tradition to slip honorably into the English liberal literary tradition, even as he had in *The Victorian Age in Literature*. Even as he undermines the reality of the Whigs' position, he refuses to satirize completely the liberalism of their literature. "We cannot understand the eighteenth century so long as we suppose that rhetoric is artificial."⁷³ "We are still haunted with a prejudice that verbal form and verbal effect must somehow be hypocritical when they are the link between things so living as a man and a mob. We doubt the feeling of the old-fashioned orator, because his periods are so rounded and pointed as to convey his feeling. Now, before any criticism of the eighteenth-century worthies must be put the proviso of their perfect artistic sincerity. Their oratory was unrhymed poetry, and it had the humanity of poetry."⁷⁴ "The English aristocrats of the eighteenth century had a real enthusiasm for liberty; their voices lift like trumpets upon the very word. Whatever their immediate forebears may have meant, these men meant what they said when they talked of the high memory of Hampden or the majesty of Magna Charta." "All this fine if florid scholarship, all this princely and patrician geniality, all this air of freedom and adventure on the sea," set the Whigs apart as English over against "the little inland state of the stingy drill-sergeants of Potsdam."⁷⁵

⁷³ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 229.

⁷⁴ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 229.

⁷⁵ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 228.

More importantly, Chesterton avoids destroying Whig liberal rhetoric with irony by arguing that, while the American and French revolutions were based on the “disruptive and creative” ideal of equality, liberty was an entirely different and equally legitimate national ideal for the English. He points out that “it is but one stride from democracy to despotism, in logic as well as in history; and oligarchy is equally remote from both.” In the case of the American Revolution, Chesterton points out that “the Whig oligarchs” were not guilty of an “utter lack of sympathy with liberty, especially local liberty” and their war with France could be read as a war for the principle of liberal nationalism against despotism and imperialism, a war in “defense of law against tyrants and courtiers.”⁷⁶ Here certainly is no Bellocian radicalism.

So he ends the chapter in which he portrayed England as standing outside and against the “tremendous spiritual revolution” sweeping all of Europe back to the Christian doctrine of equality, with applause for Nelson as the guardian of the Christian ideal of liberty and “the incarnation of a spirit in the English” that survived even “the White Terror, the period of anti-Jacobin repression.”⁷⁷ He takes Nelson as a symbol of an alternative connection between the English of the nineteenth century and England’s European and Christian past. “The expression ‘hearts of oak,’ ...is no mean phrase for the finer side of that England of which [Nelson] was the best expression. The mere name of oak calls back like a dream those dark but genial interiors of colleges and country houses, in which great gentlemen, not degenerate, almost made Latin an English language and port an English wine.” “When I think of these things, I have no temptation to mere

⁷⁶ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 234.

⁷⁷ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 244, 250.

grumbling at the great gentry that waged the great war of our fathers . . . It was an exclusive class, but not an exclusive life; it was interested in all things, though not in all men.”⁷⁸ The life of the Whig gentry was only marred, he says, by “what can only be called the atheism of Jane Austen,” which accounts for a deficiently radical sense of human equality that would eventually become the new threat to English liberalism in the twentieth-century phase of her history.⁷⁹

Lastly, Chesterton plays on the idea that, in the Napoleonic Wars, Wellington commanded an army of “the people,” made up of the most downtrodden of the English, which became, even in the days of the Whig aristocracy’s triumph, “a national symbol” of England’s struggle for their national liberty.⁸⁰ The irony of this, he says, was comic rather than tragic. Chesterton noted the dominance of irony in the language and literature of the Napoleonic war as well as in the popular language and literature of the First World War, but he took this irony as a particularly English form of expression and a sign of England’s essentially liberal spirit. “An illogical laughter survives everything in the English soul.” Comic irony was a sign of English religious sensibility, a hope in the face of cynicism that the promises of a liberal language and literature would at last be fulfilled. An ironic sense of humour, he thought, was the fruit of the illogical simultaneous belief in human freedom and divine providence, a faith in the happy outcome of evil circumstances that frees the English from determinism and fatalism in

⁷⁸ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 247.

⁷⁹ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 248.

⁸⁰ Chesterton, *Short History* (1917), 258.

judging human history. “This is the colour and the character that has run through the realities of English history, and it can hardly be put in a book, least of all a historical book. It has flashes in our fantastic fiction and in the songs of the street, but its true medium is conversation. It has no name but incongruity.”

That sort of liberty, that sort of humanity, and it is no mean sort, did indeed survive all the drift and downward eddy of an evil economic system, as well as the dragooning of a reactionary epoch and the drearier menace of a materialistic social science, as embodied in the new Puritans, who have purified themselves even of religion. Under this long process, the worst that can be said is that the English humorist has been slowly driven downwards in the social scale. Falstaff was a knight, Sam Weller was a gentleman’s servant, and some of our recent restrictions seem designed to drive Sam Weller to the status of the Artful Dodger. But well it was that some such trampled tradition and dark memory of Merry England survived.

This was a dark, but still recognizably Whig, history of England.

Chapter 10: Chesterton, Whig History and America

Chesterton's post-war writing reflects a transformation in his attitude towards America. Before the war Chesterton had considered both Britain and America tainted by Victorian "Teutonism." America especially, he believed, was influenced by German culture, and was the source of the infiltration of English culture with German ideas. But just as England's alliance with France in the war surprised him into celebrating the sources of liberalism and anti-Prussianism in England, America's support for England and France also led him to re-evaluate America's position vis-à-vis European liberalism. Chesterton reconstructed the lines of English whig history to explain her alliance with France in the twentieth century and he turned afterwards to reconstruct an American history in which American liberalism appeared as an offshoot from the whiggish English vine, rather than a revolutionary heritage. If England's story was going to be a whiggish continuity of cultural liberalism, then it would be incongruous to imagine American history defined by a liberal revolution against England, at least culturally. Chesterton had previously resisted any idea of Anglo-American brotherhood because he saw it as a vehicle for strengthening the idea of an Anglo-Saxon bond that would also link England to Germany, but after the America entry into the war, he changed his attitude. Apparently war with Germany could redeem American history in the same way that it had redeemed English history, as he had shown in *A Short History of England*.

Chesterton signaled his change of attitude towards Anglo-American relations in an interview with an American journalist in 1917. After the war, in 1921 Chesterton went on a lecture tour in America, and beneath other reasons for going—to make money to

restart the weekly journal his brother had edited before his death at the end of the war and to act as ambassador of a new Anglo-American friendship of ideas—he went to discern for himself the true quality of American liberalism.¹ As he put it, he went “looking for the fading traces of that lost cause,” republicanism.² With his lectures, he tried to prepared the ground for a reevaluation of an Anglo-American alliance, by clearing the air of the racial connotations it had accumulated. Immediately upon his return he published *What I Saw in America*, in which he made a fuller and more constructive effort of revising the picture of England and America’s historic relationship. His response to American society was very Toquevillian and he became in some ways more truly whiggish in his allegiance to the traditionalism of English liberalism, but he also admired the fighting spirit of American liberalism—its dogmatism, he would have said—and his book is problematic because of the incompatibility of his appreciations.

In an interview in 1917, Chesterton told an American reporter that “I think all sensible Englishmen now sincerely desire a real friendship with America founded on ideas, and not upon fables like the Anglo-Saxon Race.”³ This “real friendship founded on ideas” was made possible, he thought, because both nations had been forced by the war to declare a certain allegiance to France and to liberalism. “Through her recent choice and

¹ His brother’s *Short History of America* was published immediately after his death, with an introduction by Chesterton. Chesterton’s trip to America seems to have been an effort to carry on his brother’s work in many ways.

² G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 205.

³ British Library MSS volume 73400, page 7. Robert Sloss, “The Future of British-American Relations: An Interview with G, K Chesterton,” *Daily News American Edition*, November 3, 1917

change of policy, England is now fighting for the ideas of George Washington” and America joining the war revealed the ultimate bankruptcy of the “subterranean war waged by Germany in America” for the last half of the nineteenth century. The war had made English and American unity in liberalism easier rather than harder to see, he said.

In aiding the resurrection of France (Washington’s old ally) England has turned, so to speak, quite a colossal corner in history, and now faces a new future. People talk of whether America is on England’s side. In a very real sense, it would be much truer to say that England has come over to America’s side . . . The democratic dream is rather beginning than ending, as far as England is concerned. Certainly something is beginning or began when an English army stood for the first time to defend Paris. That something will mean a real sympathy with America, with the ideas of America, as with the ideas of Paris.⁴

In entering the war America had also shown how far she had been true to her liberal heritage and unaffected by nineteenth-century “Prussianism.” In the interview Chesterton refused to join those British commentators who thought America’s idealistic arrival in the war belated; he allowed that Americans were right to be wary and unsure whether the British side was the liberal side.

Nevertheless, in this interview, one can also hear Chesterton revising the Bellocian lament that England proved herself an illiberal nation in fighting against the French and American revolutions and suggesting a different version of England’s role in America’s past. “To my knowledge,” Chesterton said, “nothing has aroused such consternation and contempt among the ordinary English people as the subterranean war waged by Germany in America” to estrange America from her liberal parent nation, “not only under the

⁴ British Library MSS volume 73400, page 7. Robert Sloss, “The Future of British-American Relations: An Interview with G. K. Chesterton,” *Daily News American Edition*, November 3, 1917.

provocation of war, but for a considerable period before the war.” Chesterton did think that England’s having taken the lead in allying herself with France signaled the possibility that the English tradition of liberalism may be more robust than the American revolutionary equivalent. “The anti-British legend in America, naturally enough, is that we are a ricketty feudal survival [but] . . . America is not a chicken; and you may take your bible-oath that England is something very different from her egg-shell!” “America,” he insisted, “is a fully formed nation, with a great historic tradition already,” but perhaps Americans needed to appreciate more fully that their historic tradition had its roots in English liberalism. In *A Short History of England* Chesterton had tentatively defended the whiggish continuity of English liberalism, surviving in cultural habits and in literature through the dark period of aristocratic rule and industrial revolution, as something fragile compared to French and American theoretical liberalism. He seemed open to revising this judgement. When the interviewer asked Chesterton “How do you think this part of the German game [of undermining America’s liberal tradition] succeeded?” he responded, “I do not know America well enough to answer.”

The content of the 1921 American lectures reveals that Chesterton felt himself on a mission to explain to Americans the causes of the war, as a way of consolidating the victory over “Prussianism” gained at the cost of his brother’s life.⁵ Chesterton seems not

⁵ The complete story of the 1921 American lecture tour needs to be told. Chesterton’s lectures as reported in city after city have not been mined. The titles of the lectures give the appearance of mere, prototypical Chestertonian paradox: “The Ignorance of the Educated,” “The Perils of Health,” “Shall we abolish the Inevitable?” And to be sure Chesterton was marketed as an English humorist and he did his best to live up to the expectations of his audiences. But this cannot conceal the fact that Chesterton felt himself on a mission. He felt himself on a mission entrusted to him by his

to have varied his lectures much, hammering at the same point in city after city, so that the lectures can be pieced together from various newspaper accounts. The lecture that he gave most consistently in every stop on the tour was “The Ignorance of the Educated,” in which he communicated to America the same warning against “Prussianism” that he had worked into his wartime propaganda and *The Short History of England*. The term “Prussianism” was weighted with layers of meaning for Chesterton. Primarily Prussianism meant race theory, biological determinism, and the eugenics movement. More broadly it referred to the class arrogance and rationalizing attitude towards social reform that Chesterton called “inhumane humanitarianism.” At root, Chesterton identified it with an irreligious materialism that denied the freedom and rationality of man. He traced Prussianism’s denial of the common spiritual dignity of human nature to the reformed theological tradition of Luther and Calvin, and Prussia as the symbolic “Protestant” nation became the symbolic source of these “evils of modern society.” He told his American audience that Prussianism was a philosophy rather than a race or

only brother, who had died in the war. In one sense it was a purely financial mission. When Cecil Chesterton died, his brother felt that it was his duty to continue the political weekly paper that Cecil had edited with Belloc before the war. Many of Gilbert Chesterton’s friends lamented the fact that he was tied to *the Eye-Witness*, later the *New Witness*, later *G.K.’s Weekly* for the rest of his life; it prevented him, many thought, from pursuing his true literary greatness as a poet, playwright and essayist. Chesterton, nevertheless, poured out his money and his energy in keeping his brother’s legacy afloat. The 1921 lecture tour was a very successful money-making venture which provided the funds to restart the paper in the post-war period. Chesterton went, against the will even of his wife Francis who so often had the running of his affairs. See G. K. Chesterton, “Introduction,” in Cecil Chesterton, *History of the United States*, (Chatto and Windus, 1919). “The author of this book, my brother, died in a French military hospital of the effects of exposure in the last fierce fighting that broke the Prussian power over Christendom.”

“Prussianism” meant for Chesterton a ideological view of the world with many facets: inhuman humanitarianism.

nation, and that it appealed to the intellectual class who were disillusioned and impatient with the workings of liberal democracy.

In advertising the lecture tour in America, Chesterton was marketed as a British writer who had had a significant role in strengthening England culturally for her war effort against Germany. His wartime writing had consolidated his reputation as an authority on English culture and the English view of the causes of the Great War.⁶ Lee Keedick, the manager of the Times Square Theater, advertised the lectures by a “World Famous Literary Genius” in a brochure with commentaries on Chesterton by various literary critics who presented in various ways Chesterton’s credentials to speak on the subject of Englishness. James Douglas, another English literary critic, compared Chesterton’s spiritual significance for his generation to that of European national literary figures like Tolstoy or Ibsen and credited him with a looming “larger than Bernard Shaw or Arnold Bennett” in explaining the prophetic meaning of England’s recent struggle. Another writer compared “his position at the top of the literary world” to that of writers of the British imperial tradition, Robert Louis Stevenson and Rudyard Kipling, but conjectured that his tenure as spokesman for Little England would be more permanent. Another writer anticipating the lecture tour also made the contrast between Chesterton’s Little Englandism and the Victorian tradition of British Imperialism. He noted that

⁶ It is interesting to note that the American press tended to misname Chesterton, “Sir Gilbert Chesterton” or “Sir Gilbert.” *New York Herald*, Sunday, Feb 20, 1921. The interviewer compared Chesterton’s “soft smile” to “the pale silver sun lighting the English landscape,” his voice to “the voice of John Bull,” “but his mind is the mind of Jonathon.” He concluded by saying that much as Chesterton admires America he “remains, in Gilbert’s tag, ‘an Englishman.’” A British journalist commenting on Chesterton’s American lectures called him a “perambulating monument of London” [W. R. Titterton].

Chesterton represented a vision of England defined by her European past rather than by her imperial dominance of “the lesser breeds without the law.” Chesterton was the voice of “a little island that long ago drifted away from the continent” not of “the England on which the sun never sets.” The nation, the writer said, had been in decay before the war, “when the cloud of cynicism was over England at the end of the last century,” when Darwinism and aestheticism “were numbing England’s virility like an opiate,” Chesterton appeared and “resurrected the love of simple and homely things, of hearth and plum pudding, of wife and heroism.” American audiences ought not to view Chesterton as a mere “titanic jester.” They should “remember . . . and look at him again.” American audiences were thus prepared to hear Chesterton interpret the meaning of the war and the meaning of the Anglo-American alliance against Germany.

It is unsurprising, considering this preparation for his visit, that on his arrival, interviewers immediately turned to the question of the war and its consequences for English national character. They provided a perfect opening for Chesterton to launch into his message for America: England survived the war by renouncing the mythology of Anglo-Saxon racial identity that developed in the nineteenth century, and Britain and America must be wary of the progressive social policies which were concomitant with their long-standing admiration for Teutonism. Chesterton expressed mixed feelings about the effect of the war on English social thought; at the level of cultural theory it made German progressivism and any tendency towards eugenics seem particularly foreign, but, practically speaking, the war effort had opened up the doors to social reorganization on a large scale. In an interview given on his arrival in New York, Chesterton said, “The war has precipitated some great changes in England of which we aren’t fully aware yet.

Official interference with the individual, brought about under the pretenses of war regulations, has increased. On the other hand, Prussianism has been knocked out—people no longer talk Nietzsche.”⁷ Chesterton’s goal for his trip was to encourage the spread of what he considered a healthy revulsion from “Prussianism” after the war. He was taking advantage of the general post-war mood and his own reputation to make a case, once again, for the uniquely liberal character of the English tradition.

Chesterton’s lectures presented negative arguments against racial theories about the bond between England and America rather than constructive arguments about the real basis of their relationship in a long European tradition of liberalism. As John Crowe Ransom wrote in his report of Chesterton’s lecture to the Vanderbilt Centenary Club, Americans had long been familiar with “the positive Chesterton, who defends Christian dogma, who wrote the most thoughtful manual for conservatives, *Orthodoxy*,” but were now to be introduced to the “negative Chesterton,” who with his lecture on “The Ignorance of the Educated,” attacked race theory’s unsound roots in pseudo-science.

In this lecture, the staple of his tour, Chesterton argued that only the educated could, in their intellectual arrogance, be fooled by what he called “fads in ethnological and anthropological sciences.” He claimed that it was unfortunately the educated classes in England and America who had succumbed to “the long-standing efforts to inculcate the doctrine that all that is best in civilization was of Teutonic origin.”

The term Anglo-Saxon, implying something absolutely pedantic and entirely false, had been used in the persistent effort to bring about an understanding that the English people were Anglo-Wertembergers, or Anglo-Hanoverians, or even Anglo-Prussians. Back of this effort was the

⁷ British Library, Chesterton Collection, Additional Manuscripts, volume 74062, p. 9. [uncited newspaper clipping]

doctrine that all that was good and powerful in civilization had been brought out of the North by a race of giants, eight feet tall, with golden hair.

The Teutonic theory, he said, appealed to pride and succeeded with those who prided themselves on their education.

Chesterton framed his objection to racial definitions as a rebuke to “vulgar pedantry” rather than as a correction of the prejudice of the masses. “The fallacies of the uneducated were generally harmless,” he said, “whereas the profound errors of the educated were often highly mischievous.” The problem of racism was a problem peculiar to the educated because it involved a misuse of language. “One of these instances was the talk of ‘races’ when the people of a given nation was meant; of the habit of speaking of the Teutonic race when the people of Germany is meant.” The theory had succeeded because it had been “delivered in homeopathic doses”—a shift of terminology, a repeated use of the “long-winded, pseudo-scientific evasions of that ethnology that speaks of ‘Celts’ and ‘Teutons,’”—all of which led by degrees to “knowing the names of things and not the things themselves.” “The educated” were “the kind of people who call Bohemia ‘Czechoslovakia,’ the kind of people who call the British and Americans by the name of Anglo-Saxons.” The “educated” were the people who tended to “talk about the ‘missing link’ and the ‘superman’ as if they were realities.” Therefore, Chesterton argued, racism should be considered an “intellectual movement” rather than merely a sociological phenomenon.

The difficulty did not, Chesterton insisted, lie with the general population, the illiterate masses of the unenlightened people of Germany, England, or America. “The English waiter, to whom all foreigners were queer people who jabbered would have seen

the facts at once.” The uneducated give great weight to traditions of language, culture, and religion; these were the factors by which they determined a “foreigner” and an “alien” from a countryman. There was nothing more ineffable about national identity in their minds. “Working men are not under these delusions as are the educated—they do not say of a German waiter that he is an example of a strong race, or of an Italian barber that he is an example of a decadent civilization, but they call them both foreigners and let it go at that.”

“There is a deeper side to such fallacies. The whole catastrophe of the Great War may be traced to the racial theory. If people had looked at people as nations in place of races the intolerable ambition of Prussia might have been stopped before it attained the captaincy of the southern German states . . . An ignorant person would never have made such a mistake. He would have said ‘There are two foreigners fighting’ and concerned himself with the merits of the fight . . . He never would have said that it was a struggle between a decadent race from the shores of the Mediterranean and the Teutonic tribes of the north of Europe.⁸

The Teutonic theory, Chesterton argued, was only available and attractive to the modern educated mind, which disregarded local traditions as irrational relics of barbarism and envisioned erasing the boundaries set by local custom and language. Racism, Chesterton argued, was the flip side of a strangely intellectualized view of human nature, the flip side of a refusal to take religion and cultural traditions seriously in either the realm of morals or the realm of politics. He believed that “rationalism, or refined agnosticism, while it might seem to be a simple and livable theory by which to live without a creed, is without roots in human life,” and in the end the “educated,” who considered themselves “enlightened” and freed from the toils of tradition and prejudice, were the ones who were

⁸ British Library, Chesterton Collection, Additional Manuscripts, volume 74062, p. 28. [uncited newspaper clipping]

falling into racism. With this theme dominating his lectures, before long Chesterton's tour was accompanied by headlines proclaiming:

“Chesterton Says There is No Anglo-Saxon Race”

“Blasts Teutonic Theory”

“False Ethonology Now Endangering the World.”

Chesterton intended his message to heighten his American audience's conviction of the justice of the English cause during the war. He hoped to refine the bond between the “English-speaking peoples” of its racist tendencies, to build up a mutual allegiance to their liberal heritage, and to awaken them to the danger of the continuance of the social controls that had been accepted during the exigencies of war. To one reporter who asked what form of government he considered best, he answered shortly, “The smallest.” With some encouragement he went on:

I suppose the war, with its censorships and its “lids” and “bans”, is responsible for the Puritan ties that bind us now . . . When the war came, the enemies of republicanism leaped upon it with gusto and made it an excuse to more laws. They were able to say for instance, “For the Sake of the Union Jack, don't take any bites of chocolate on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays.”

During the war, Britain had become illiberal, Chesterton implied, had become, in fact, as illiberal as the old bogey of illiberal Roman Catholic religion. What better opportunity could present itself for re-examining the old dichotomy between liberalism and tradition?

The bulk of *What I Saw in America* is dedicated to a description of American society, but the burden of Chesterton's argument falls in his defense of England as a liberal nation. Chesterton says that the aim of the book is to promote a greater respect

between the English and Americans based on a more genuine understanding of their distinct national identities. “The very worst way of helping Anglo-American friendship is to be an Anglo-American,” he says, that is, someone who believes that England and America are culturally identical or who (like H. G. Wells in his post-war book on the World State) believes that together they form the seedbed of a single larger imperial nation.⁹ Chesterton extends in this book the lecture tour’s project of “saving Anglo-American friendship,” by attempting to remove the English misunderstanding of America and dispelling the American misunderstanding of England. In the final analysis, however, the comparison runs to the favor of England. Chesterton’s criticism of American society is very Toquevillian and, although he would probably never have admitted it, his criticism of America’s revolutionary brand of liberalism is very Burkean. Chesterton clearly thinks that there is too much adulation for America on the part of the English and too much easy superiority on the part of the Americans, which leads both to overlook the liberal virtues of English society. Both under-estimate the power of tradition to give continuing vitality to a liberal society, and therefore look more easily to racial or progressive theories as the basis for their ideals. The saving grace for American liberalism, Chesterton thought, would be the extent to which she perpetuated the cultural tradition of Christendom.

⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 253, and Chapter “Wells and the World State.” The only thing worse than imagining that English and American societies embody the same ideals is to imagine that they are united by the bonds of race. “At least Englishmen and Americans do exist; and it may be possible, though repulsive, to imagine an American and an Englishman in some way blended together. But if Angles and Saxons ever did exist, they are all fortunately dead now; and the wildest imagination cannot form the weakest idea of what the sort of monster would be made by mixing one with the other.” (253)

The central chapter of the book that captures Chesterton's equivocal position vis-à-vis American and England is "The Republican in the Ruins." Here he points out that the metaphorical "youth" of America as a nation could refer either to the newness and novelty, the progressive and modern character of the nation, or it can mean that the nation is primitive and undeveloped and he thinks that it is fortunate that "the two elements really are wildly entangled in America."¹⁰ "If we survey the Europe of to-day with real clarity and historic comprehension, we shall see that it is precisely the most recent and the most rationalistic creations that have been ruined," the Prussia of Frederick the Great, the Russia of Peter the Great, innovators who "recognized themselves as rationalists bringing a new reason and order into an indeterminate barbarism."¹¹ On the one hand, America is one of these rational experiments in nation building that prove short-lived. On the other hand, American society is marked by a traditionalism that might lengthen her life as a nation.

"America is nearer to Europe than England is," Chesterton says, because English constitutionalists purposely excluded any of the "abstraction or academic logic" that appears in the revolutionary constitutions.¹² England, he says, has accumulated a variety of institutions and types of liberty in her long history, so that she preserves the peculiar liberalism of the Middle Ages and the peculiar liberalism of the Renaissance, "but there

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 199.

¹¹ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 197-198.

¹² G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 15, 16. For which, he says, "our constitutionalists have invariably thanked God, with the jolliest boasting and bragging."

was another ideal of freedom which the English never had at all; or anyhow, never expressed at all." "There was another ideal, the soul of another epoch, round which we built no monuments and wrote no masterpieces. You will find no traces of it in England; but you will in America."¹³ Republicanism, "the real religion of the eighteenth century," of Robespierre and Jefferson, never "never cleared a space in which to build that cold and classic building called the Capitol . . . never made elbow-room for that free if sometimes frigid figure called the Citizen."¹⁴

Yet, Chesterton suggests that the American liberalism is not wholly of this revolutionary and theoretical type. American liberalism, he says, was most "thoroughly sincere," "when that great Virginian first declared it in surroundings that still had something of the character of an English countryside."¹⁵ He argues for revising American history to foreground the element of continuity between English and American cultural traditions rather than the Puritan break with England:

Whenever the anniversary of the Mayflower comes round, there is a chorus of Anglo-American congratulation and comradeship, as if this at least were a matter on which we all agree . . . Long ago I wrote a protest in which I asked why Englishmen had forgotten the great state of Virginia, the first foundation and long the first in leadership; and why a few crabbed Nonconformists had the right to erase a record that begins with Raleigh and ends with Lee, and incidentally includes Washington."¹⁶

¹³ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 202.

¹⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 203.

¹⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 9.

¹⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 224, from Chapter "Lincoln and Lost Causes." This was taken from one of his lectures. In the South, strangely enough, he did not apply his message to race relations between black and white so much as to the relationship between Northern and Southern culture. Chesterton drew a parallel between the theory that the Teutons of the North were responsible for the best in

Chesterton was evidently looking for ways to include American history within the bounds of the English whig history of continuity.

Also, Chesterton's evaluation of the absence of theoretical liberalism in English history is equivocal but finally positive. "In eighteenth-century England [the citizen] was crowded out, partly perhaps by relics of better things of the past, but largely at least by the presence of much worse things in the present."¹⁷ But in the struggle between revolution and tradition, theory and piety, republic and even the British compromise of a "godless Erastian Church and a powerless Hanoverian king," Chesterton says, "it is

European culture and the theory that the Puritans of New England were the source of all that is noble in American culture. "Some Americans are Puritans. England had heard too much of the Puritan element and too little of the cavalier element of the South and the new element of the West" ("Blasts Teutonic Theory," BL74062, p.28). The Nashville Banner hailed such an endorsement of Southern exceptionalism:

What he said about that hoary old hoax and brazen assumption, long palmed off on the unthinking and uninformed, that the so-called Pilgrim Fathers were the essence and foundation of all that is good in American life, is the equal and exact truth and much appreciated by the people of the South.

Last year while the tercentenary of the landing at Plymouth Rock was being celebrated, the English Press, that has for several years for obvious reasons courted American good will, repeated complacently Boston platitudes about Puritan virtues and the alleged Puritan monopoly in building America, and Chesterton ruthlessly exposed the lack of basis for such an assumption.

"I cannot imagine," Chesterton wrote, "why a history that begins with Raleigh and ends with Lee, and incidentally includes Washington, should be utterly swept aside and forgotten." He wrote that while he was in England, and certainly not with a view to currying favour on this side of the Atlantic. Probably he is the first man who ever spoke of "a history that begins with Raliegh and ends with Lee" but the period so defined and the people it included did have definite and striking qualities (British Library, Chesterton Collection, Additional Manuscripts, volume 74062, p. 36, "Chesterton and the South," The Nashville Banner, undated clipping).

¹⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 203-204.

emphatically the Republic and not the Church that I venerate as something beautiful but belonging to the past.”¹⁸ He boasts that “we English never made anything upon the model of a capitol, while we can match anybody with the model of a cathedral,” because “surely [the] pagan temple of political liberty is now much more of a ruin than the other; and I fancy I am one of the few who still take off their hats in that ruined temple. That is why I went looking for the fading traces of that lost cause, in the old-world atmosphere of the new world.”¹⁹

In the end, however, he finds that America also has a tradition of piety and religion that provides her liberalism a vitality comparable to England’s. Chesterton notes “the crowded cathedral of St. Patrick in New York,” the “unfinished Anglo-Catholic cathedral at Washington,” “the splendid and spirited Gothic churches springing up,” and concludes that “it is not in the religious centres that we now have the feeling of something beautiful but receding, of something loved but lost.”²⁰ While “there are still corners of Philadelphia or Boston or Baltimore where we can feel so suddenly in the silence its plain garb and formal manners, that the walking ghost of Jefferson would hardly surprise us,” the living spirit of the nation is evident in her churches and in the private piety of the people for family and cultural traditions rather than in public piety for public ideals. “It is exactly in the spaces cleared and leveled by America for the large and sober religion of the eighteenth century . . . that I feel as if I were the last Republican.”²¹

¹⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 205.

¹⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 204.

²⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 205-206.

²¹ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 206.

Chesterton is both critical and admiring of the peculiarly public nature of American life. The two central images that he takes away from his visit, out of which he draws his analysis of American society and his comparison with English society, are pictures of the American hotel and the American interviewer. He opens his book with an apology for “a probable lack of proportion in this work,” because he realized that these two prisms through which to see American culture were, in a sense, selected for him as a traveler, a lecturer, and a public figure.²² Both these images serve his critique of America’s public and rationalistic brand of liberalism, and his argument that English liberalism is missing exactly these elements. His simultaneous criticisms and appreciations leave an impression of contradiction, but he argues that “the traveller fails to understand a foreign country, through treating it as a tendency and not as a balance.”

Every nation, like every family, exists upon a compromise, and commonly a rather eccentric compromise; using the word ‘eccentric’ in the sense of something that is at once crazy and healthy . . . [T]he nation fills up its own gap with its own substitute; or corrects its own extravagance with its own precaution. The national antidote grows wild in the woods side by side with the national poison.²³

²² G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 19.

When I went wandering about the States disguised as a lecturer, I was well aware that I was not sufficiently disguised to be a spy. I was even in the worst position to be a sight-seer. A lecturer to American audiences can hardly be in the holiday mood of a sight-seer. It is rather the audience that is sight-seeing; even if it seeing a rather melancholy sight. Some say that people come to see the lecturer and not to hear him; in which case it seems rather a pity that he should disturb and distress their minds with a lecture.

²³ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 55-56. Later in the text he adds:

A man treats his own faults as original sin and supposes them scattered everywhere with the seed of Adam. He supposes that man have then added

What Chesterton tries to convey with his idea of a balance is that the American “national poison” may be the English “national antidote,” and that is why it is so dangerous if they imagine that Anglo-American brotherhood means that their cultures are the same. It would be impossible for them to diagnose themselves together and prescribe a common antidote for their national ills. It is nevertheless beneficial for them to think of themselves as sharing an ideal or balance, to think of themselves as variant growths of a single cultural tradition; what the English and Americans need, he says, is “a friendship founded on reciprocal ridicule.”²⁴

The passages on hotels best exemplifies Chesterton’s criticism-and-appreciation mode of grappling with American culture and history:

In all my American wanderings I never saw such a thing as an inn. They may exist; but they do not arrest the traveller upon every road as they do in England and in Europe . . . There are the hotels. There are indeed. There are hotels toppling to the stars, hotels covering the acreage of villages, hotels in multitudinous number like a mob of Babylonian or Assyrian monuments; but the hotels are not inns.

Broadly speaking there is only one hotel in America. The pattern of it, which is a very rational pattern, is repeated in cities as remote from each other as the capitals of European empires . . . And before touching on this solid and simple pattern itself, I may remark that the same system of symmetry runs through all the details of the interior. As one hotel is like

their own foreign vices to the solid and simple foundation of his own private vices. It would astound him to realise that they have actually, by their own erratic path, avoided his vices as well as his virtues. His own faults are things with which he is so much at home that he at once forgets and assumes them abroad. He is so faintly conscious of them in himself that he is not even conscious of the absence of them in other people . . . The Englishman takes it for granted that a Frenchman will have all the English faults. Then he goes on to be seriously angry with the Frenchman for having dared to complicate them by the French faults. The notion that the Frenchman has the French faults and not the English faults is a paradox too wild to cross his mind (262).

²⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 258.

another hotel, so one hotel floor is like another hotel floor. If the passage outside your bedroom, or hallway as it is called, contains, let us say, a small table with a green vase and a stuffed flamingo, or some trifle of the sort, you may be perfectly certain that there is exactly the same table, vase, flamingo on every one of the thirty-two landings of that towering habitation. This is where it differs most from the crooked landings and unexpected levels of the old English inns, even when they call themselves hotels. To me there is something weird, like a magic multiplication, in the exquisite sameness of these suites. It seemed to suggest the still atmosphere of some eerie psychological story . . .

But it is not merely the Babylonian size and scale of such things, it was the way in which they were used. They are used almost as public streets or public squares. My first impression was that I was in some sort of high street or market-place during a carnival or revolution.²⁵

Chesterton does not take the significance of the hotel to be an all-encompassing revelation of American culture; as noted above, he makes room in his book for an appreciation of the private pieties American culture. But his Toquevillian warning is that the tendency towards publicity and uniformity is America's weakness, as excessive secrecy and discrimination is England's failing: "The American hotel is not America; but it is American. In some respects it is as American as the English inn is English. And it is symbolic of that society in this among other things: that it does tend too much to uniformity; but that that very uniformity disguises not a little natural dignity."²⁶

The note of compliment in that last phrase signals Chesterton's effort at appreciating the "antidote" American culture might provide English culture. While "the first impression [of a hotel] is of something enormous and rather unnatural . . . of something unearthly about the vast system . . . [of] an ideal Utopia of the future," he sees

²⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 20-23. Chapter "A Meditation in a New York Hotel."

²⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 28-29.

it at last as perhaps as one of the new world's "resurrections of old things which have been wickedly killed or stupidly stunted in the old countries."

I have looked over the sea of little tables in some light and airy open-air café; and my thoughts have gone back to the plain wooden bench and wooden table that stands solitary and weather-stained outside so many neglected English inns. We talk of experimenting in the French café, in the sense some fresh and almost impudent innovation. But our fathers had the French café, in the sense of the free-and-easy table in the sun and air. The only difference was that French democracy was allowed to develop its café, or multiply its tables, while English plutocracy prevented any such popular growth. Perhaps there are other examples of old types and patterns, lost in the old oligarchy and saved in the new democracies. I am haunted with a hint that the new structures [in America] are not so very new; and that they remind me of something very old. As I look from the balcony floor [of a hotel] the crowds seem to float away and the colours to soften and grow pale, and I know I am in one of the simplest and most ancestral of human habitations. I am looking down from the old wooden gallery upon the courtyard of an inn. This new architectural model, which I have described, is after all one of the oldest European models, now neglected in Europe and especially in England.²⁷

Thus, Chesterton uses the image of the hotel, with which he could evoke a revolutionary and progressive version of American liberalism that cuts it off from any English or European tradition, to evoke an unbroken tradition of liberalism that unites all three, and to critique the corruption of public spirit in England.

If Chesterton's imaginative use of the American hotel finally cuts in favor of America, the image of the American journalist provides more space for his defense of England. American attention to public life, public debate, public speech, public rhetoric would correct the faults of English liberalism. Chesterton believes American "gregariousness," "comradeship," and publicity "make possible a certain communal

²⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 31-32.

courage, a democratic derision of rich men in high places.”²⁸ He admires the American “power of spontaneous social organization” which is the soul and success of democracy.” “Their high spirits, their human ideals are really creative, they abound in unofficial institutions; we might almost say in unofficial officialism.”²⁹ But, besides the “grandeur,” there are also “grave disadvantages” to the rule of public opinion and national unity. “Pacifists who complained in England of the intolerance of patriotism have no notion of what patriotism can be like. If they had been in America, after America had entered the war, they would have seen something which they would have always perhaps subconsciously dreaded.”³⁰

The American interviewer epitomizes the obsession with the public and the oblivion of the private or personal for Chesterton.³¹ He laments the “endless defiles and

²⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 286, 290-291.

²⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 287.

³⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 167. Chapter, “Fads and Public Opinion.”

³¹ Chesterton offers an equivocal defense of American interviewers in “Irish and other Interviewers,” but in “The Spirit of England” criticism gets the upper hand. I quote from both these chapters in this summary.

Chesterton’s critical attitude towards this kind of writing goes back to his earliest articles. See for example, G. K. Chesterton, “Literature: Burlesques of Royalty,” *Daily News*, March 21, 1901 (review of “The personal Life of Queen Victoria” by Miss Tooley):

It is the idea that we come nearer to the soul of a human being by climbing over walls and listening at keyholes, whereas the soul is only to be opened with the key of reverence . . . But to imagine that we get nearer to anyone by multiplying those endless personal details which we know in our own case to be more misleading than a mask or a cloak, to insist on those frivolities of private life which are more sacred because more fragile than its tragedies, to think that a deep-rooted family joke can be transplanted one whit better than a family curse—this is the deep wrong of realism.

It is also interesting to recall here some negative comments in the press about “importing American fashions” that accompanied Chesterton’s first personal interview in 1903. For a

deputations of total strangers each announced by name and demanding formal salutation” that met him upon his arrival in the United States. These “troops of sociable human beings” who come to interview him oppress his English sensibilities with their “unending and unchanging stream of American sociability and high spirits.”³² They become immediate acquaintances and ask personal questions but make no offer of friendship or personal loyalty. “Our own national temperament would find it more difficult to disconnect when connections had really been established.”³³ He is more apt here to defend English culture against this spirit that “substitutes the impersonal atmosphere of the State for the personal atmosphere of the home.”³⁴ The American’s public celebration of individualism destroys individuality and creates a monotony of sameness in all social relations. “The Englishman,” on the other hand, Chesterton says, “is really very interesting . . . because he is individual.”

No man in the world is more misrepresented by everything official or even in the ordinary sense national. A description of English life must be a description of private life. In that sense there is no public life. In that sense there is no public opinion. There have never been those prairie fires of public opinion in England which often sweep over America . . . The English are a nation of amateurs; they are even a nation of eccentrics. An Englishman is never more English than when he is considered a lunatic by other Englishmen. This can be clearly seen in a figure like Dr. Johnson, who has become national not by being normal but by being extraordinary. To express this mysterious people, to explain or suggest why they like tall hedges and heavy breakfasts and crooked roads and small gardens with

variety of reactions to the interview (published in the *Idler*, May 1903) see *Daily News*, May 28, 1903; *Wolverhampton Express*, June 3, 1903; *Oxford Chronicle*, June 13, 1903; *Glasgow Evening News*, June 11, 1903; *Portsmouth Times*, June 27, 1903; *Outlook*, June 20, 1903; *Queen*, June 20, 1903.

³² G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 289.

³³ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 56-57.

³⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 293.

large fences, and why they alone among Christians have kept quite consistently the great Christian glory of the open fireplace, here would be a strange and stimulating opportunity for any of the artists in words who study strange peoples.

English cultural traditions preserve the spirit of liberty more securely than do American theory and public therefore concludes by demanding a genuine appreciation of England's distinctive culture and not the "official and conventional compliments" that arise from celebrations of Anglo-Americanism, the "pompous abstractions about Law and Justice and Truth; the ideals which England accepts as every civilized state accepts them, and violates as every civilized state violates them."³⁵

What is wanted for the cause of England to-day is an Englishman with enough imagination to love his country from the outside as well as the inside. That is, we need somebody who will do for the English what has never been done for them, but what is done for any outlandish peasantry or even any savage tribe. We want people who can make England attractive; quite apart from disputes about whether England is strong or weak. We want somebody to explain, not that England is everywhere, but what England is anywhere; not that England is or is not really dying, but why we do not want her to die.(284)

There is something finally contradictory about *What I Saw in America*, however, because, after this Burkean defense of tradition against rationalism, Chesterton's suggestion that England in the twentieth century develop from unconscious patriotism to conscious nationalism and a dogmatic allegiance to English liberalism seems to run counter to the personal and traditionary nature of Englishness. "The one thing that really wants doing . . . is to make England attractive as a nationality, and even as a small

³⁵ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 284-285.

nationality.” Chesterton says, “I have suggested a note of nationalism rather than patriotism for the English; the power of seeing their nation as a nation and not as the nature of things,” because the liberal virtues of the English are “now blindly neglected and in daily danger of being destroyed.”³⁶ This call for conscious nationalism clashes with the distinction Chesterton draws between America, “a nation with a soul of a Church,” and England, which has “the enormous advantage of feeling it natural to be national.”³⁷ “America is the only nation in the world that is founded on a creed . . . if not about divine, at least about human things.”³⁸ The English, on the other hand, he had insisted “do not need a creed, because [they] have got a character.”³⁹ Chesterton’s whiggish confidence in the past and complacency in future of the English liberal tradition was more tenuous than the nineteenth-century Whig historians.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it is clear that Chesterton was deeply marked by the whig consensus, even into the post-World War I period.

³⁶ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 294.

³⁷ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 10.

³⁸ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 7.

³⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *What I Saw in America* (1922), 10.

⁴⁰ This equivocal admiration for the “British constitution” runs from the beginning to the end of Chesterton’s career. See G. K. Chesterton, “The Secret of England,” *Daily News*, February 20, 1904. “[The English] have no system of thought, no system of politics, clear and communicable and scientific like the French theory of democracy or the German schemes of education. Our political system is not a democracy, it is an oligarchy tempered by philanthropists and snobs.”

Part III. Conclusion

In *A Short History of England* and in his considerations on American history, Chesterton proved finally whiggish in using history as a rhetorical tool for creating national piety. His perception of the Great War as England's re-orientation vis-à-vis French and American liberalism brought him into line with the twentieth-century whigs. There is some sense in which his historical imagination resonates with even the most unabashedly Whig historian of the twentieth century, Winston Churchill.¹ Churchill and Chesterton's historical understanding clashed at many points, but Churchill's *World Crisis* was, like Chesterton's *Short History*, a justification of the war in terms of England's historic liberal identity.²

For Chesterton and Churchill the war was not a catastrophe or a revelation of the inherent bankruptcy of English culture or "Western Civilization."³ They both resisted when the Bloomsbury group tried to replace the wartime consensus among British

¹ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996), makes the case for seeing Churchill as the most successful of the twentieth-century Whig public historians. His whig narrative was a constant behind his shifting political alignments.

² Chesterton was critical of the Whig aristocracy and Churchill its great defender. Chesterton even wrote scathingly of Churchill's ancestral hero, John Churchill, Duke of Marlborough, a passage in *A Short History of England* that could very well have had personal overtones considering Cecil Chesterton and Belloc's political animus against Churchill. This passage, by a popular historian with hopes of replacing Green as interpreter of England's past, may have inspired Churchill to write a biographical defense of his ancestor, though Chesterton's criticism was within the best Macaulayesque Whig tradition.

³ This got Chesterton and Churchill into trouble with the inter-war generation when their defense of the World War I and persevering nineteenth-century liberal idealism grated on the mood of bitter irony that set in after 1918.

historians, that placed the blame for the war on Germany, with an indictment of the pre-war system of alliances and balance of power. Writing during the war, Lewis Namier, A. F. Pollard, Arnold J. Toynbee, and G. W. Prothero, had argued that German militarism had disrupted the West's progress towards a rational, liberal international order. Lytton Strachey, John Maynard Keynes, G. Lowes Dickinson, G. P. Gooch, and Gilbert Murray initiated the post-war reaction, arguing that the veiled diplomatic and economic pressures of a free market system lent itself to these periodic eruptions of violence.⁴ George Trevelyan and Winston Churchill have been seen as two historians who maintained and revived the Whig tradition of English history for a broad public against the challenge of both the Tory radical historians and the Bloomsbury revisionists. Churchill especially "met Strachey and Belloc on their own terms, brandishing the same panache and fortified by an equivalent dose of confidence."⁵ Chesterton can be seen as part of this reaction as well.

In *World Crisis*, Churchill argued against the idea that 1914-1918 was a disruption of England's steady progress through history. Giving a long history of the origins of the war, Churchill argued the German threat to the independent, liberal, democratic society of Britain was comparable to the threat posed by sixteenth-century imperial Spain, the seventeenth-century tyranny of the Stuarts, and the hegemonic

⁴ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996), 208-209.

⁵ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996), 206.

designs of France in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. War in defense of liberty was a staple of England's continuing national life.⁶

A Short History of England revealed some of Chesterton's faith in the English liberal tradition's continuity, but in the passages of his *Autobiography* in which he reflects on the meaning that the Great War his whig faith seems even more robust. He summarizes his interpretation in a little meditation on the war memorial in his home town of Beaconsfield.

The War Memorial in Beaconsfield commemorates the rescue of Beaconsfield; not an ideal Beaconsfield, but the real Beaconsfield. There are all sorts of things in such an English country town with which I do not agree; there are many which I have tried all my life to alter . . . but I do not want it discredited or flattened out by Prussianism.⁷

What was saved [by the war] was Beaconsfield; just as what was saved was Britain; not an ideal Beaconsfield; not a perfect or perfectly progressing Beaconsfield, not a new Beaconsfield with gates of gold and pearl descending out of heaven from God; but Beaconsfield. A certain social balance, a certain mode of life, a certain tradition of morals and manners, some parts of which I regret, some parts of which I value, was in fact menaced.⁸

Chesterton dismissed the post-war critics who could not see their way to this interpretation of the war. "Those who now think too little of the Allied Cause are those who once thought too much of it. Those who are disappointed with the great defense of

⁶ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996), 211-212. It is arguable that Churchill's *World Crisis*, aimed at a general audience, was more influential during the twenties and thirties than the revisionists' version.

⁷ G. K. Chesterton, "The Shadow of the Sword," *Autobiography* (1936), 255. [War in defense of Beaconsfield is more just than war to end all wars.] I am far from certain that, even if anybody could prevent all protest or defiance under arms, offered by anybody anywhere under any provocation, it would not be an exceedingly wicked thing to do (255).

⁸ G. K. Chesterton, "The Shadow of the Sword," *Autobiography* (1936), 253.

civilization are those who expected too much of it.”⁹ He rejoiced that “England and Europe have come out of the War, with all their sins on their heads, confused, corrupted, degraded; but not dead.”¹⁰

Chesterton’s sense of the Great War as a turning point in history when England realigned herself with the liberal democratic inheritance of the French and American revolutions brought his conception of Anglo-American relations into line with Churchill’s. Winston Churchill, on the 4th of July, 1918, made his famous speech in Westminster declaring that “the Declaration of Independence is not only an American document . . . it follows on the Magna Charta and the Bill of Rights as the third great title-deed on which the liberties of the English-speaking people are founded.” The ideas expressed in the Declaration, Churchill said, were handed down to Americans from Chatham and Burke, John Hampden and Algernon Sydney. “They spring from the same source; they come from the same well of practical truth, and that well is here by the banks of the Thames, in this island that is the birthplace and origin of the British and American race.” The American ideal “sprang from the English soil and from the Anglo-Saxon mind.”¹¹

Churchill went on to say that the rescue of Britain and France by American reinforcements in the Great War satisfied the deep desire of the British “to be truly

⁹ G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, [refers to H. G. Wells] 254.

¹⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Autobiography*, 254.

¹¹ See *Winston S. Churchill: his complete speeches, 1897-1963*, ed. Jame Robert Rhodes (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1974).

reconciled before all men and all history with their kindred across the Atlantic Ocean . . . to dwell once more with them in spirit . . . to write once more a history in common.” The Anglo-American alliance in the twentieth century appeared to him “to transcend the limits of purely mundane things. It is a prodigy. It is almost a miraculous event. It fills us with the deepest awe.” “The conviction must be borne in upon the most secularly-minded of us that the world is being guided through all this chaos towards something much better, much finer, than we have ever known. One feels in the presence of a great Design . . . No event since the beginning of the Christian era is more likely to strengthen and restore men’s faith in the moral governance of the universe.” Here Churchill let loose the idea that the war was “a conflict between Christian civilization and scientific barbarism.” It represented the direction that Churchill would increasingly move, towards incorporating the idea of England and America as leaders of Christendom into his idea of them as leaders of an age of rationalism, science, and progress.

Churchill saw the Great War as a culminating fulfillment of an Anglo-American tradition that has a kind of straight-forward continuity of progress, while Chesterton saw the Great War as a kind of English revolution, in which she suddenly realigned her own true historic identity, but the two narratives coincided at the end. A more significant difference between Chesterton and Churchill’s version of England’s European and American relations was that Churchill hung on to the language of race, which Chesterton attacked as part of “Prussianism.” Churchill was prone to make distinctions between the kind of relationship Britain could have with the “Latin nations who are our Allies” and the “little shattered States” Europe “who look to us to rescue them in their present

torment,” and the Anglo-American “kinship of blood,” which surpassed kinships “of sentiment, of history and language.”¹² Chesterton rejected of any idea of a “kinship of blood” or racial connection between Britain and America, and any idea that America is the fullest evolutionary embodiment of the ideals of liberty and democracy.

Churchill and Chesterton were also part of a broader tradition of historical reflection inspired by the war that developed further the idea of “The West” and the defense of the West. These kinds of narratives, as formulated in Britain and America, were primarily used to justify their alliance during the Great War and to encourage their continuing spiritual alliance in the face of an impending second “world crisis.” When viewed as part of this larger movement, rather than narrowly in the context of British histories, Chesterton’s insistence on the European roots of English culture appears to be part of a broadening of the whig stream of history, towards an alliance-justifying narrative that created links between America and Europe.

“Western Civilization,” the actor in this new and broader whig history, could be read as either a progressive reality or as a traditional reality. Its history could be linked to “the rise of rational thought” or tagged to the “endurance of Christian values.” This flexibility was key to the rhetorical value of the term. During World War II Churchill made use of the idea of “the West” with all its resonance, often referring to the rational, progressive West and Christendom in a single grand sentence. He referred to London as a “strong City of Refuge which enshrines the title-deeds of human progress and is of deep consequence to Christian civilization.” Chesterton’s writing helped to preserve and foster

¹² Speech on “Anglo-American War Aims” to the American Luncheon Club in

the idea of England as a part of European Christendom, nourishing an idea that Churchill would turn to during England's "Finest Hour" to express "All the Britain is, and all that Britain means." Churchill and Chesterton shared an ability to hold both the Christian tradition and the spirit of the liberal revolutions together in a single entity that they called "the West." It was a kind of eclecticism that refused to reject either of the elements that appeared to have been at war within European culture. This was the central "paradox" of Chesterton's work and the most powerful uniting element in Churchill's rhetoric.

The key to broadening the whiggish historical narrative from an exclusively British history to the history of "the West" was to include France. The post-war narratives had to justify an alliance with France in the face of a historical tradition that held France to be the great 'other' and enemy of Britain's glorious progress.

One way of seeing this paradoxical vision in action is to look at Chesterton and Churchill's idea of the nation of France, because Chesterton and Churchill's imagined France combined the revolutionary and traditional versions of France's identity. It has been observed that Churchill's working conception of France "came more from historical imagination, if not stereotype, than from sociological observations."¹³ Churchill distinguished two Frances, the France that inspired the liberal revolutions of the nineteenth century and the France of fidelity to the Christian tradition of Europe. These two Frances were represented in his 1937 volume of essays on *Great Contemporaries* by the figures of Clemenceau, the "apparition of the French Revolution," and Foch, ancient,

London in 1918.

¹³ F. Bedarida, "Winston Churchill's image of France and the French," *Historical Research*, vol lxxiv no. 183, February 2001; 95-105. See also D. Johnson, "Churchill and France," in *Churchill*, ed. R. Blake and W. R. Louis (Oxford, 1996), 41-55.

aristocratic, and chivalrous.¹⁴ If it was true, as a close friend recalled, that “in Winston’s eyes France is civilization,” then for Churchill, civilization had an irreducibly paradoxical nature.

Chesterton also held two seemingly contradictory versions of France together in his vision of the nation. As George Orwell recalled years later, Chesterton always envisioned France as “a land of Catholic peasants incessantly singing the ‘Marseillaise’ over glasses of red wine.”¹⁵ Chesterton, like Churchill, developed his idea of the French nation not so much from observation or lived experience, but from an immersion in the cultural constructions of France that he had read. And from Belloc.¹⁶

After all that has been written on Belloc’s influence on Chesterton’s historical perceptions, it should be noted that Belloc’s influence, especially in this matter of understanding France, was not completely anti-whig. It is often forgotten, but Belloc himself had a certain “whiggish” piety and belief of historic continuity when it came to France. When Chesterton first met him, Belloc was not yet the abrasive deconstructor of England’s progressive history that he later became. Belloc originally made a name for himself as a popular historian of France and an interpreter of French culture for the English public. Belloc’s earliest and most popular works, *The Path to Rome* (1902) and

¹⁴ W. S. Churchill, *Great Contemporaries* (1st. edn., 1937), 236-7. Cited in Bedarida.

¹⁵ George Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism,” *Polemic*, no. 1, October 1945, collected in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt Brace; NY, 1968), 366.

¹⁶ In his *Autobiography*, Chesterton remembers Belloc as a figure of Napoleon at their first meeting in a French café in Soho.

The Old Road (1904), were his most whiggish reflections on history and the spirit of these works echo through Chesterton's writing. They are personal historical essays, and in them Belloc conveys a sense of repose upon a unified past and a jaunty confidence in his pan-European identity that instantly attracted attention.¹⁷ *A Path to Rome*, which sold more than a hundred-thousand copies and made Belloc's name as a young writer, was an account of his journey across France to Rome on foot, a kind of spiritual autobiography in the form of an essay-travelogue and a commentary on the physical and spiritual state of Europe.¹⁸ One might almost call the book a "whig history of Europe" because of the way that it effaces the signs of the French revolution and evokes the living presence of "Old Europe" under all the changes of the nineteenth century.¹⁹ In *The Old Road*, a similar travel narrative set in England, Belloc follows the footsteps of the medieval pilgrims to St. Thomas Becket's shrine at Canterbury Cathedral. Belloc attempted to trace in the features of his native England the same historical continuity with a Roman and Christian past that he had found on the continent. Later evaluations of Belloc that count

¹⁷ Belloc wrote in the preface of an earlier historical travel-guide to Paris that it was "that kind of history (if it can be called history at all) which is as superficial and as personal as a traveller's drawing or as the notes of a man's diary, but which has its purpose because, like such sketches and memoranda, it serves to give the necessary framework upon which the memory and imagination may build." (Quoted in Robert Speaight, *Life of Hilaire Belloc*, (London, 1957), 155).

¹⁸ Robert Speaight, *Life of Hilaire Belloc*, (London, 1957), 161-163.

¹⁹ A.N. Wilson's brief analysis of *A Path to Rome* captures this well. *Hilaire Belloc*, (New York, 1984), 103-106.

him as an “auxiliary of conservatism” or a “prophet of the counter-revolution” seem to be based on an appreciation of his essays of this meditative sort rather than his histories.²⁰

Belloc’s deeply personal historical imagination played out rather strangely in his attempts at more “academic” histories.²¹ In his histories economic determinism often overshadows the spiritual and intellectual realities that are so vivid in his essays. He did not manage to create narratives that reflected his personal philosophy of history: “First comes, in every great revolution in European affairs, a spiritual change; next, bred by this, a change in social philosophy and therefore in political arrangement; lastly, the economic change which political rearrangement has rendered possible.”²² In his historical narratives, he emphasized periodic violent readjustments of the social and political structure, “reversions to the normal,” he would call them, that turned whole cultures as on a hinge.²³ He interpreted the French Revolution as the prototype of such a conservative revolution. In that sense he was the Edmund Burke of French history. As Burke had seen the Glorious Revolution as a reversion to the ancient constitution and the language of popular sovereignty and social contract as peripheral to the reality of the event, Belloc read the French Revolution as an unconscious reversion to the norm of peasant proprietorship that had been achieved in the guilds and communes of the Catholic Middle

²⁰ See for example, Frederick Wilhelmson, *Hilaire Belloc: No Alienated Man, A Study in Christian Integration* (New York, 1953); John P. MacCarthy, “Hilaire Belloc and the French Revolution,” *Modern Age*, Spring 1993, 35: 251-8.

²¹ Belloc later said, “I only wrote for money. *The Path to Rome* is the only book I ever wrote for love.” Quoted in Wilson, 103.

²² Quoted in Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996), 50.

²³ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996), 40-45.

Ages and he dismissed the anti-clerical, anti-medieval, and anti-Catholic rhetoric of the actors as peripheral to the revolutionary movement. He came to see English history, on the other hand, as definitively marked by the absence of any such economic “reversions to normal,” any successful revolutionary return to the democratic and distributive norm of medieval society. The confiscation of monastic and common land during and after the Reformation led to a massive dismantling of “Christian civilization,” and the twentieth-century solution was some form of anti-capitalist revolution and “distributism.”²⁴ The cause and the solution were economic. Belloc’s economic determinism is even clearer, despite his frequent disclaimers, in his books of socio-political commentary, the *Party System* and the *Servile State*.²⁵

²⁴ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996).

²⁵ Belloc managed to be a French republican and an English monarchist, a Jacobin in French history and a Jacobite in English history, and a proponent of revolution in both. At the heart of Belloc’s infatuation with revolution was an acceptance of Rousseau’s notion of the popular sovereignty and identification of the community with the “Common Will.” Belloc identified the national community with its public expression in the state. He saw “that vague force (you may call it only an idea) which you will never find in an individual, and which you will always discover in a mass—the great common man which the French metaphysicians have called “Le Peuple”” directly at work in the workings of the state (Belloc, Danton, 159-60, Quoted in MacCarthy, 253. John P. MacCarthy, “Hilaire Belloc and the French Revolution,” *Modern Age*, Spring 1993, 35: 251-8). Belloc might have inherited a streak of historical idealism—also evident in his enthusiasm for Carlyle—from his time at Oxford. (See Hilaire Belloc, “Introduction,” Thomas Carlyle, *The French Revolution* (New York, 1906, 1961). The people, the nation, the State made up the single historical actor par excellence. He could not envision political structures as only one factor in the life of a nation. There had been, in English history, no successful public expressions of the Rousseauian “Common Will” to reveal the continued vibrancy of the united national community. Belloc dismissed the three heroic episodes of Whig history—the Reformation, the Civil War, and the Glorious Revolution—as the work of a handful of wealthy men not the action of the nation itself in history. English ecclesiastical, political, and economic structure had been transformed but “the people” had done nothing. There was no national subject in England’s national story: English history since the Middle Ages was the story of the “party system,” not of the English nation.

By-and-large, Chesterton accepted Belloc's socio-economic reading of French and English history, but, as he gave more emphasis to spiritual causes and the power of ideas in history, Belloc's historical radicalism affected him less than Belloc's historical piety. It is better to see Chesterton as attempting to write a pious and paradoxical history of England that paralleled the kind of pious and paradoxical history Belloc wrote for France, rather than to see Chesterton accepting Belloc's version of English history, in which Belloc employed more irony than piety.

Chesterton thus preserved his link to the Whig tradition of history that had shaped him as boy in the Victorian period. "I was brought up in a noble and emancipated atmosphere," he wrote in 1904, "Taught like all English schoolboys to admire classic civilization, I was taught also in the English tradition to regard the religion of the Dark Ages as a thing of dolls and driveling superstition."²⁶ There is abundant evidence of the truth of Chesterton's claim, and perhaps the honesty and solidity of his early British patriotism formed a bond between him and his newspaper audience. From his earliest schooldays, Chesterton filled his books and notebooks with marginalia and sketches that sprawl across whole pages of text. It would make a fascinating psychological study to trace the relationship of these visual images with the texts which they decorate. In a book of *Jacobite Songs and Ballads*, for example, published in 1887 and given to Chesterton by his grammar school friend E.C. Bentley, Chesterton's ironic marginal notes reveal how thoroughly he had absorbed a patriotic Whig history and how far he was from any radical interpretation of the past. A song entitled "Britons, Who Dare to Claim" comes in for particularly sarcastic boyish objections. He calls it "about the coolest song I ever

²⁶ "Mr. McCabe's Assault," *Daily News*, January 13, 1904, (letter to editor).

heard” (Chesterton uses “cool” in its older connotation of “impudent”). The first verse runs (with Chesterton’s underlinings and marginal interjections):

<p><u>Britons, who dare to claim,</u> That great and glorious name, Rouse at the call! <u>See English honour fled,</u> Corruption’s influence spread, Slavery raise its head, And <u>freedom fall!</u></p>	<p>“give the glorious court over to traitors.” “England’s honour under Charles II?” “I call that cool!”</p>
<p>Church, king, and <u>liberty,</u> Honour and property, All are betrayed: Foreigners rule the land, Our blood and wealth command, Obstruct, with lawless hand</p>	<p>“James was remarkably kind to the Church no doubt.” “What the verse means I cannot conceive.”</p>
<p>Shall an usurper reign, And Britons hug the chain? That we’ll deny. To retrieve James’s right; For church, king, and laws we’ll fight; Conquer and die.</p>	<p>“The Stuarts’ respect for law is well-known.”</p>
<p>Join in the defence Of James our lawful prince And native king: Then shall true greatness shine. <u>Justice and mercy join,</u> Restored by Stuart’s line, <u>Virtue’s</u> great spring.</p>	<p>“Oh lor’, Justice & Mercy, Jeffreys & Melfort.” “Charles II for instance.”</p>
<p>Down with Dutch politics, Whigs, and all fanatics, The old Rump’s cause! Recall your <u>injured</u> prince, <u>Drive Hanoverians hence,</u> Such as rule here against <u>All English laws.</u></p>	<p>“Better than French” “Better men than you.” “Not so easy.” “Well this is good: It was the Hanoverians, it seems, not the Stuarts that ruled illegally.”</p>
<p>Borne on the wings of fame, Charles’s heroic name</p>	<p>“Which Charles? Neither were Heroic.”</p>

All his foes dread.
 He'll from his father's throne
 Pull the usurper down;
 Glorious success shall crown
 His sacred head.

“Did Hampden or Cromwell fear it.”

“Will he.”

Chesterton's endearingly earnest scrutiny of these songs reveals how imbued he was as an adolescent with the liberal zeal for history.²⁷ His poetic and his critical urge were formed by a historical and narrative passion. Later in this same book of songs, he rewrites the lines to “Ungrateful Britons” to turn it into a rant against the Jacobites, the French, priests and tyrants. Later again, next to a line which reads, “Our Charles will visit in the bush,/ Like Moses langsyne,” Chesterton scawls the question, “Remarkable personal similarity between Charles and Moses?” and objects to the ballad's biblical metaphors and the theory of the divine right of kings which they evoke, saying: “Here the parallel grows blasphemous.” On the final page Chesterton concludes, “I should recommend a course of History to the several authors of these spirited, but unreasonable effusions.” Chesterton, the imperial reviewer, dealing with popular texts with utter seriousness and a self-conscious chivalric generosity, had already taken up his pen... but in his youth he wrote vehemently *in favor* of the Whig Protestant view of history. Chesterton's genuine sympathy with the most generic form of popular Whig patriotism withstood his radical revision of his understanding of English history along the lines of Cobbett's Tory Radical condemnation of the Henrician Reformation. If later on Chesterton showed more sympathy with the idea that the Hanoverians were “foreigners” and admired the Stuarts for their “wild virtues,” his liberal passion for the rule of law and democratic parliaments, his abhorrence of an established alliance between “priests and tyrants” remained

untouched. Chesterton's readers responded to this commonality beneath his radicalism and reinterpretation of English patriotism.²⁸

²⁷ Chesterton says in an early article that as a schoolboy he thought that students should be taught history and nothing else.

²⁸ Dr. John Saward, the director of the Chesterton Collection at Pater College, Oxford, drew my attention to this marginalia and discussed possible interpretations of Chesterton's drawings and notes with me.

Conclusion

I.

The manner of Chesterton's eventual conversion to Roman Catholicism illustrates the conception of Englishness to which he had arrived. A year after returning from his lecture tour in America, on July 14, 1922, Chesterton was quietly received into the Roman Catholic Church in a brief, private ceremony in his hometown of Beaconsfield. He did not publicize his conversion, and even his closest friends only heard of it a while afterwards. There was nothing in the act that suggested a symbolic gesture or a public declaration and as the public became aware of it, there was little response. The public had become accustomed to thinking of Chesterton as "Catholic" since *Orthodoxy* was published in 1908. Looking back, W. H. Auden described the twenties as a period in English cultural history that was peculiarly void of the dramatic conversions typical of the Decadent 1890s or politically charged 1930s. "No one converted to Catholicism, or if they did I don't remember," he said.

A decade later, Chesterton gave a key to how he viewed his own conversion in an article describing John Henry Newman's. Despite the kindred spirit of their quest for a religious tradition with the marks of antiquity and catholicity, Chesterton found Newman's conversion very different from his own in being not only a personal, but a public and symbolic act. Chesterton sensed traces of Newman's evangelical upbringing in his public rejection of Anglicanism, signaling his repudiation of the Tractarian narrative of a continuous English religious history, which he himself helped construct. Chesterton thought that Newman's manner of conversion did not convey to the public the full meaning of a move from Anglo-Catholicism to Roman Catholicism.

“The robust English Protestant . . . did not understand that, by the theory called Anglo-Catholic, the Catholic Church in Europe cannot be the enemy. The whole theory is that . . . the English Church is a part of it. Such a High Churchman does not leave the Church of England because he discovers for the first time that the Church of Rome is Catholic. He leaves the Church of England because he discovers that the Church of England is Protestant. That is the paradox; for he does so when he comes to think what the Protestants also think.”¹

The emphasis of Newman’s public conversion, Chesterton thought, was his leaving the Anglican Church—the event remembered as the “great going-out of ’45.” The English Church, Newman thought, had broken with tradition and become rootless and lifeless.

Chesterton found it difficult to say whether Newman ever found repose in a genuine appreciation for “historic Christianity with all its sins on its head” because of his narrowly intellectual, almost rationalistic, understanding of the faith. “He might be no longer a man of the English Church, but he was still a man of the Oxford Movement; and if he was no longer under the authority of Canterbury, he was still under the influence of Oxford.” Newman’s “intense clarity,” “the sense of loneliness and the sense of the supreme need for lucidity,” the “very radiance of his own inner understanding, seemed to give rise to nothing but misunderstandings,” so that both before and after his conversion Newman was regarded as something “foreign” to the churches he embraced. “The English felt his particular sort of Anglicanism as something very alien; and yet, to the very end, there are Catholics who felt his particular sort of Catholicism as vaguely Anglican.”²

¹ G. K. Chesterton, “Why Newman was Misunderstood,” *The Universe*, February 3, 1933.

² G. K. Chesterton, “Why Newman was Misunderstood,” *The Universe*, February 3, 1933.

Chesterton became a Roman Catholic without any of this fanfare of condemnation. He interpreted his life as a seamless history, thinking that his new faith was hardly new to him since he had received it in some way from his parents' Broad Church humanism, his wife's devout Anglicanism, and, more broadly, the everyday English culture that surrounded and formed him. Loyal attachment to family, nation, and wife forged his new faith, which was thus the fruit of *pietas* rather than of a lonely spiritual search. He believed that the rudiments of the *sensum fidei* lived in the traditions of attachment to family and domesticity, patriotic allegiance and "historical reverence" of the English people, which remained long after the deterioration of traditional economic structures after the Reformation.³ He found traces of orthodox belief in the strangest places: in slang, in adolescent fiction, in china shepherdesses popular as knick-knacks. Chesterton found orthodoxy inescapable, wedged into every corner of English life, language, and literature. He therefore could not consider his acceptance of Roman Catholicism to be a rejection of English culture.

II.

Chesterton's conversion became something controversial only after his death. He died in July 1936, the month and year that saw the beginning of the Spanish Civil War, and the date is symbolic of the problem of assessing his reputation and influence. The generation of the 1930s defined themselves and the literary character of their decade with reference to the way that the Spanish Civil War dominated the English political and cultural imagination, and the assessment of Chesterton's place in English literary history

³ G. K. Chesterton, "Chaos," *Daily News*, May 9, 1903.

began under the aegis of their creation of the “Myth of the Thirties.”⁴ W. H. Auden, George Orwell, and others of the generation who had missed the Great War portraying the literature of their generation as ideologically motivated and dishonest. Looking back over the decade from the perspective of the Munich crisis in 1938 and the Nazi-Soviet pact of August 1939, they berated their generation’s reaction against liberalism and patriotism and their retreat into ideologically dangerous “isms.” “It was a period marked by intellectual error, false hopes, delusion, and dishonesty; the fact that it ended in war may therefore be considered as a deserved destiny, a just punishment for moral failure; its writers were all of necessity politically motivated.”⁵ Chesterton’s posthumously published *Autobiography* (1936), a series of memoirs, biographies, and reflections on his life’s work were published during this period and the Myth of the Thirties colored the initial readings of Chesterton’s place in English cultural history.⁶

George Orwell in particular took Chesterton as an icon of the kind of dangerously ideological and propagandist writing of the 1930s. Orwell’s vision of the thirties and the political divisiveness of its literature was conditioned by his experience of the Spanish

⁴ Samuel Hynes, *The Auden Generation: Literature and Politics in England in the 1930* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1972).

⁵ Hynes, *Auden Generation* (1972), 393.

⁶ Chesterton’s *Autobiography* sold well in 1936, and Maisie Ward’s biography of him became a bestseller in 1944. *Morning Post*, November 10, 1936 announced that the first impression of Chesterton’s *Autobiography* sold out before publication and that a second and third were ready for publication. Maisie Ward’s biography was on the *London Times*, *London Evening News*, and *New York Times* bestseller lists for several months and the *Liverpool Daily Post* (May 6 1944) declared it the “literary success of the year.” *Times*, April 15, 1944, and April 26, 1944; *Evening News*, April 15, 1944, April 22, 1944, May 3, 1944; *Books of the Month* May 1944; *Spectator*, April 4, 1944; *New York Times*,

Civil War, which he described in *Homage to Catalonia* as a struggle by patriotic socialists to regain their native land from the international ideological powers of Soviet Communism and Fascist Catholicism. In describing the English literary scene, he found the same elements. After the Great War, Orwell said, there had been an attempt at “getting rid of such primal things as patriotism and religion,” which seemed to many to be somehow at the root of the violence of war, but, it was impossible “to get rid of the need for *something to believe in*.”(515) In the absence of natural patriotism among the intelligentsia, Catholicism and Communism became “the patriotism of the deracinated.” “Between 1935 and 1939 the Communist Party had an almost irresistible fascination for any [English] writer under forty . . . like a few years earlier, when Roman Catholicism was fashionable.”⁷ The Thirties saw the “Catholic gang,” the “Stalinist gang,” and the “pacifist-Fascist gang” follow each other in quick succession.⁸

November 14, 1944 (which remarked that it was a bestseller especially in Philadelphia with 16,000 copies sold in first six weeks).

⁷ Orwell, “New Directions in Poetry and Prose,” *Inside the Whale* (1940), in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt Brace; NY, 1968), I: 512.

⁸ Orwell, *Pacifism and the War* (1942). “Notes on Nationalism” gave the clearest expression of this view of the thirties as an ideological period in English literary history, a time when writers were divided between various “transferred nationalisms.” True patriotism he argued was “devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life, which one believes to be the best in the world but has no wish to force upon other people. Patriotism is of its nature defensive, both militarily and culturally.” “Nationalism,” as he understood it, was the peculiar temptation of the intellectual class, because it attached itself to some non-existent, ideal entity, or worked “in a merely negative sense, *against* something or other and without the need for any positive object of loyalty.” Nationalism, he said, “is inseparable from the desire for power.” The Nationalist hides his own selfish desire for power under the need to increase the power and prestige of the “unit in which he has chosen to sink his own individuality.” “Nationalism is power hunger tempered by self-deception.” “Communism, political Catholicism, Zionism, Anti-Semitism, Trotskyism and Pacifism . . . Jewry, Islam, Christendom, the Proletariat and the White

Orwell took Chesterton as the “outstanding exponent—though he was perhaps an extreme case rather than a typical one” of “deracinated patriotism.” He referred to Chesterton’s writing “during the last twenty years or so of his life” as the seedbed of the “political Catholicism” of the 1930s “Catholic gang.” Christopher Hollis, Evelyn Waugh, Graham Greene, T. S. Eliot, Arnold Lunn, Aldous Huxley, W. H. Auden, Wyndham Lewis, J. B. Morton, and the leaders of what he considered an “outflanking movement in the big counter-attack against the Left,” Ronald Knox, R. H. Benson, C. S. Lewis, Lord Elton, A. P. Herbert, G. M. Young, Alfred Noyes, were all heirs to the “Chesterbellocian idea” or “simply the leavings on Chesterton’s plate.”⁹

Yet many of the thirties “Catholic gang” considered Chesterton a figure from an earlier and altogether more politically naïve period, and he himself seemed wary of the younger generation. Graham Greene admired Chesterton for the “cosmic optimism” expressed in his religious works, *Orthodoxy* and *Everlasting Man*, but discounted him as a serious political writer. Evelyn Waugh rejected Chesterton as “the poetic and romantic

Race” inspired “passionate nationalistic feeling” among intellectuals who needed to be “unshakeably certain of being in the right.”

⁹ Orwell, *Tribune*, June 23, 1944, As I Please, *Tribune*, October 27, 1944, As I Please. W. C. Sellar and R. J. Yeatman’s *1066 and All That* (1930) reveal the perpetuation of Shaw’s “Chesterbelloc” idea into the 1930s in their humorous description of the martyrdom of Thomas a Becket:

It was at this time that Thomas a Belloc, the great religious leader, claimed that clergymen, whatever crimes they might commit, could not be punished at all . . . Henry II, however, exclaimed to some of his Knights one day, ‘Who will rid me of this Chesterton beast?’ Whereupon the Knights pursued Belloc and murdered him in the organ at the Cathedral. Belloc was therefore made a saint and the Knights came to be called the Canterbury Pilgrims (29).

child of a smug tradition,” and scorned his undisturbed faith in human nature, democracy, and English liberalism.¹⁰

Chesterton, commenting on the 1930s Catholic revival among intellectuals, wrote that this reaction was “of a peculiar kind . . . not what I expected . . . not particularly what I wanted.” “The difficulty about the evident reawakening of Catholicism in modern England” was its narrowly political and intellectual character. He had hoped for a “popular revolt” of “ordinary, old-fashioned, obstinate people” against political corruption and the growing eugenic mentality. He found instead that “it is the Intellectuals . . . who have now suddenly discovered the dangers of mere novelty, of mere anarchy, of mere negation” and “it is because they are so very Modern that they have rebelled against Modernism.” But he sensed in the generation of T. S. Eliot and Aldous Huxley “a suspicion of every sort of freedom” that reminded him of H. G. Wells and Bernard Shaw. They were not reacting from license towards a healthy liberalism, but towards “an almost cloistered refinement, full of the virginal traditions of old religion and repudiating not only the demagoguery of to-day, but even the democracy of yesterday.” This “small minority of rather fastidious and over-refined persons” appealed to “the great

¹⁰ Graham Greene, *Spectator*, 21 April, 1944; Evelyn Waugh, *The Commonweal*, 21 March 1947, in D. J. Conlon ed., *G. K. Chesterton: A Half Century of Views* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 56-57; 74. Article on Decline and Fall? Arthur Waugh. Waugh noted that in Chesterton’s first novel, *The Man Who Was Thursday*, he imagined a universal conspiracy to subvert the social and moral order of Europe, but, that in the end of the novel “the whole thing turns out to be moonshine.” Waugh thought that such optimism and naivete could only be possible to those who had not lived to see the era of the Gestapo and the NKVD. “Could Chesterton have written like that today, if he had lived to see the Common Man in arms, drab, grey and brown, the Storm Troopers and the Partisans, standard-bearers of the great popular movements of the century?” In fact, Orwell in one of his more insightful moments, thought that the thirties Catholic writers went out of their way to avoid the Chestertonian model.

social institution we call Snobbery” with their condescending “talk about Humanism and St. Thomas Aquinas.” Their rejection of “the Revolution and all its heritage of liberty, equality, and fraternity” was a “last turn of the twisting road of progress,” which was now “pointing back towards what we have called for a hundred years reaction. It is apparent in the Fascists; in the Hitlerites; and even in the open anti-democracy of the Bolshevists.” Chesterton felt that the 1930s Catholic revival, in so far as it was a “movement,” was too narrowly a response to the particular intellectual and political dilemmas of modernity. “Conversion,” he wrote, “calls on a man to stretch his mind, as a man awakening from a sleep may stretch his arms and legs.”¹¹

Chesterton’s objection to the overly intellectual nature of the 1930s Catholic revival parallels much of Orwell’s criticism of the 1930s intelligentsia. There was in fact much in common between Chesterton and Orwell’s view of Englishness. Orwell’s series of “As You Please” articles for the *Tribune* were a kind of continuation of the Chestertonian tradition of literary and cultural criticism. Orwell’s articles—“A Defense of English Cooking,” “A Nice Cup of Tea,”—perpetuated into the post-war era the Victorian role of liberal public moralist that Chesterton maintained in the Edwardian

¹¹ It seems that in the last years of his life Chesterton was a little exasperated with being classed with this new wave of Catholic apologists. He objected particularly to those who forgot that a large part of his work was written before his conversion to Roman Catholicism. When he was accused of using his talents “at the service of the most reactionary of Churches” in writing *The Victorian Age in Literature*, he begs to remind his accuser that he did not belong to the Church at the time that he wrote the book. Chesterton was a man with a great sense of humor and generally enjoyed being ragged about being a Catholic apologist and even jokingly described himself as nothing more than a dirty religious propagandist. G. K. Chesterton, “Reaction of the Intellectuals,” “The Last Turn,” “Frozen Freethought,” Collected in *The Well and the Shallows* (London, Sheed and Ward, 1935).

period.¹² They shared the nineteenth-century belief that patriotic identification served to ground liberalism in the realities of life in a human community. Orwell's attacks on the intelligentsia's "deracinated patriotism" was in the same vein as Chesterton's attacks on the abstract humanitarianism of his fellow peace workers during the Anglo-Boer War. Orwell's insistence on the "spiritual need for patriotism and the military virtues" in *My Country Left or Right* in 1940 was the same creed Chesterton put forward in his essay "On Patriotism" in the pro-Boer collection *England: A Nation* or in his criticism of the Fabians inability to "feel with ordinary men about ordinary things."¹³ Orwell echoed Chesterton's message to the Americans during his 1921 lecture tour: the "educated" and self-proclaimed "enlightened intellectuals" were more in danger of falling into abstractions about race and ideology, than were the ordinary working people. Even the "Blimps," Orwell thought, the Churchills who had the running of the empire, were less in danger of falling into abstract ideology than the new intellectual class.

In *The Lion and the Unicorn* Orwell argued that it was the glory of the English that they were "not intellectual." Their "horror of abstract thought" created a distinctive national culture. The English had an "overwhelming strength of patriotism" founded on an instinctive "code of conduct which is understood by almost everyone, though never formulated," and an indefinable "emotional unity, the tendency of nearly all its inhabitants to feel alike and act together in moments of supreme crisis." And at the same

¹² Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists: political thought and intellectual life in Britain, 1850-1930* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991). Collini argues that this role died in the thirties with T. S. Eliot's generation.

¹³ G. K. Chesterton, "The Last of the Rationalists (A Reply to Mr. Bernard Shaw)," *New Age*, February 29, 1908.

time, he said, there is the “*privateness* of English life,” the English way of being communal without being official. “We are a nation of flower lovers, but also a nation of stamp-collectors, pigeon-fanciers, amateur carpenters, coupon snippers, darts-players, cross-word puzzle fans.” Their domesticity and eccentricity resisted attempt to rationalize and systematize public life.

Like Chesterton, Orwell defined this liberal England against the new ‘other’ of “Prussianism” rather than the old ‘other’ of Catholicism. “Decades before Hitler was ever heard of, the word ‘Prussian’ had much the same significance in England as ‘Nazi’ has today.” They both understood England’s Christian tradition as an ecumenical, cultural affair, Chesterton’s “orthodoxy,” C. S. Lewis’s “Mere Christianity.” English Christianity, Orwell said, was not recognizably Protestant, “puritanical,” or connected with the state church. “The genuinely popular culture of England is something that goes on beneath the surface, unofficially.” The “common people,” he said, maintained their slang and sentimentality, their bawdy humor, beer-drinking and gambling despite all the licensing and lottery acts passed by the state. “Yet they have retained a deep tinge of Christian feeling,” which makes them less susceptible to “the power-worship which is the new religion of Europe.” “The belief in ‘the law’ as something above the State and above the individual” prevented the “totalitarian idea that there is no such thing as law” from taking root. “In England such concepts as justice, liberty and objective truth are still believed in. They may be illusions, but they are powerful illusions. The belief in them influences conduct, national life is different because of them.”

Orwell's famous passage in the *Lion and the Unicorn* in which he compares the English nation to a Victorian family echoes both Chesterton's essay in *Heretics* which he describes society as having the bracing qualities of a family and his passage in *A Short History of England* in which he describes the English nation as a family guarding the guilty secret of having founded its prosperity on stealing.

England is not the jewelled isle of Shakespeare's much-quoted passage," Orwell said, "nor is it the inferno depicted by Dr. Goebbels. More than either it resembles a family, a rather stuffy Victorian family, with not many black sheep in it but with all its cupboards bursting with skeletons. It has rich relations who have to be kow-towed to and poor relations who are horribly sat upon, and there is a deep conspiracy of silence about the source of the family income. It is a family in which the young are generally thwarted and most of the power is in the hands of irresponsible uncles and bedridden aunts. Still, it is a family. It has its private language and its common memories, and at the approach of an enemy it closes its ranks. A family with the wrong members in control—that perhaps, is as near as one can come to describing England in a phrase.

Chesterton and Orwell felt that the English accepted patriotic obligations as due to "the sample of humanity which is actually given us."¹⁴ England was a nation with a particularly strong tradition of *pietas*.

Orwell most clearly reveals his sympathy with Chesterton's idea of Englishness in his writings on Dickens. Orwell virtually lifted his reading of Dickens straight from Chesterton.¹⁵ He admired "Dickens's early optimistic period," when his "criticism of society is almost exclusively moral" and viewed the later period as a decline, marked by

¹⁴ G. K. Chesterton, *Heretics*, 140; *Short History of England*, 248-250.

¹⁵ I say this despite Orwell's opening lines in his article on Dickens about Chesterton's "own highly individual brand of medievalism" blurring his literary judgement. There is simply too much parallelism in the rest of the article between Orwell and Chesterton on Dickens to credit his criticism as meaningful. Orwell wrote elsewhere that "Chesterton's Introductions to Dickens are about the best thing he ever wrote."

Dickens's reinterpretation of revolution in the Carlylean style as a movement by the superhuman forces of history and the revolutionary mod as "sub-human." "Who has not felt sometimes that it was 'a pity' that Dickens ever deserted the vein of *Pickwick* for things like *Little Dorrit* and *Hard Times*?"

Dickens is most English, Orwell says, when "his radicalism is of the vaguest kind," when his social criticism is moral and aimed at individuals rather than economic and aimed at the system. There is less danger in a vague moral critique, Orwell says, to the English ideal of liberty, than in the kind of criticism that aims at reshaping society on rational lines. "Dickens has not this kind of moral coarseness. The vagueness of his discontent is the mark of its permanence. What he is out against is not this or that institution, but, as Chesterton put it, 'an expression on the human face.' Roughly speaking, his morality is the Christian morality." (458) It is Dickens's "quasi-instinctive" Christianity, Orwell says, that makes him most English. He finishes his piece on Dickens with a passage that summarizes Chesterton's idea of an English Whig narrative in which somehow French revolutionary liberalism has been accommodated to the continuous tradition of Christian liberalism.

In a country like England, in spite of its class-structure there does exist a certain cultural unity. All through the Christian ages, and especially since the French Revolution, the western world has been haunted by the idea of freedom and equality; it is only an *idea*, but it has penetrated to all ranks of society. The most atrocious injustices, cruelties, lies, snobberies exist everywhere, but there are not many people who can regard these things with the same indifference as, say, a Roman slave-owner . . . Nearly everyone, whatever his actual conduct may be, responds emotionally to the idea of human brotherhood. Dickens voiced a code which was and on the whole still is believed in, even by people who violate it. It is difficult otherwise to explain why he could be both read by working people (a thing that has happened with no other novelist of his stature) and buried in Westminster Abbey.

Orwell, like Chesterton, believed that Dickens, speaking with the “generous anger” of a “nineteenth century liberal” and a “quasi-instinctive” Christian, had discovered the “private language” or “code” of the English nation.¹⁶ It was not surprising, therefore, that in the 1950s the public began to link Chesterton and Orwell as twin prophets of liberal England’s struggle against “totalitarianism.”¹⁷

It is difficult to account for the dichotomy between Orwell’s dismissal of Chesterton and the apparent sympathy between their thinking on England. But Orwell was perhaps led to thinking of Chesterton as an icon of the 1930s Catholic revival by Chesterton’s posthumous association with the Catholic publishing company, Sheed and Ward. After his death Sheed and Ward became the foremost publisher of Chesterton’s articles and manuscripts, which his secretary Dorothy Collins selected and edited.¹⁸

¹⁶ George Orwell, “My Country Right or Left,” from “Folios of New Writings, Autumn 1940,” in *The Collected Essays, Journalism, and Letters of George Orwell*, ed. by Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (Harcourt Brace; NY, 1968). Chesterton and Orwell could look back on their Victorian-Edwardian childhood and public school days as a source of their instinctual patriotic allegiance. As Orwell wrote, “To this day it gives me a faint feeling of sacrilege not to stand to attention during ‘God Save the King.’ That is childish, of course, but I would sooner have had that kind of upbringing than be like the left-wing intellectuals who are so ‘enlightened’ that they cannot understand the most ordinary human emotions. It is exactly those people whose hearts have never leapt at the sight of the Union Jack who will flinch from revolution when the moment comes.”

¹⁷ John Rodden, *The Politics of Literary Reputation: The Making and Claiming of ‘St. George’ Orwell* (Oxford, OUP, 1989), See especially: Chapter 6, “The Saint,” section 21: The Religious Fellow-Traveler: Christopher Hollis, Brian Wicker, and the British Catholic’s Orwell. (362-382); Christopher Hollis, *A Study of George Orwell: the Man and his Work* (Chicago, 1956); Lionel Trilling, “Introduction” to *Homage to Catalonia*.

¹⁸ During Chesterton’s lifetime Sheed and Ward published *The Thing* (subtitled *Why I am a Catholic* in the American edition, 1929/1930), *Christendom in Dublin* (London, 1932), which was an account of the Eucharistic Congress in Ireland, *Sidelights on New London and Newer York* (London, 1932), partly taken from his 1931 year as literature professor at Notre Dame, the American edition of Chesterton’s highly regarded

Chesterton's first regular relationship with a publishing house was with John Lane-Bodley Head who published his early works of controversy, *Heretics*, *Orthodoxy*, and *George Bernard Shaw*, and his early novels, *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* and *The Ball and the Cross*.¹⁹ In 1920, Hodder and Stoughton replaced John Lane as Chesterton's primary British publisher for his full-length works.²⁰ Chesterton also had long-standing partnerships with Methuen and Cassell. Methuen published his *Charles Dickens* in 1906 and then began publishing annual collections of his *Illustrated London News* articles and poetry.²¹ Cassell, besides publishing *What's Wrong With the World* in 1910 and *Eugenics*

introduction to philosophical Thomism, *St. Thomas Aquinas* (New York, 1933), and *The Well and the Shallows* (1935).

¹⁹ Arlene Shaner, "The John Lane Company," *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1638-1899*, *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 49 (Detroit, Michigan, 1986), 246. The John Lane Company opened an American branch in 1896. Besides Chesterton, they introduced Max Beerbohm and H. G. Wells to American audiences. The John Lane Company was associated with the radicals and aesthetes of the 1890s. John Lane also regularly published the New York editions of Chesterton's work until 1920 when they sold their American holdings to Dodd, Mead and Company, who then became Chesterton's primary publisher in the United States.

²⁰ They published three of his travel books, *The New Jerusalem* (London, 1920), *What I Saw in America* (London, 1922), and *The Resurrection of Rome* (1930), religious works, *St. Francis of Assisi* (London, 1923) and *The Everlasting Man* (London, 1925)—which was a kind of sequel to *Orthodoxy*—and biographies, *William Cobbett* (London, 1925), and *Robert Louis Stevenson* (London, 1927).

²¹ Cassell's collections are: *Tremendous Trifles* (London, 1909), *Alarms and Discursions* (London, 1910), *A Miscellany of Men* (London, 1912), *The Uses of Diversity* (London, 1920), *Fancies Versus Fads* (London, 1923), *The Outline of Sanity* (London, 1926), *Generally Speaking: A Book of Essays* (London, 1928), *G. K. C. and M. C.* (London, 1929), *Come to Think of It...* (London, 1930), *All is Grist: A Book of Essays* (London, 1931), *All I Survey: A Book of Essays* (London, 1933), *Avowals and Denials* (London, 1934), and *As I Was Saying: A Book of Essays* (London, 1936). The series finished posthumously with *The Glass Walking-Stick and Other Essays, from the Illustrated London News, 1905-1936*, edited by Dorothy Collins.

The poetry Methuen published was *The Ballad of the White Horse* (London, 1911), *The Flying Inn* (London, 1914), *Wine, Water, and Song* (London, 1915), and *The*

and Other Evils in 1922, was his publisher for the Father Brown mysteries and collections of short stories for twenty years.²² In 1926 Chesterton contributed a collection of poems, *The Queen of Seven Swords* to the newly founded Sheed and Ward's first publications list and he published occasionally with them over the next decade, lending them the prestige of his name.²³

Collected Poems of G. K. Chesterton (London, 1933). Methuen also published his wartime *Letters to an Old Garibaldian* (London, 1915). His poetry and war propaganda seem to have taken the place of the annual collection of essays for the years 1911 and 1915, leaving a gap of three years during the war, 1916-1919.

Dodd, Mead, and Co. published the New York editions of all these collections except the first, which was published in America by John Lane.

²² Cassell published *The Innocence of Father Brown* (London, 1911), *The Wisdom of Father Brown* (London, 1914), *The Man Who Knew Too Much and Other Stories* (London, 1922), *Tales of the Long Bow* (London, 1925), *The Incredulity of Father Brown* (London, 1926), *The Secret of Father Brown* (London, 1927), *The Poet and the Lunatics: Episodes in the Life of Gabriel Gabe* (London, 1929), *Four Faultless Felons* (London, 1930), and *The Scandal of Father Brown* (London, 1935). The series continued posthumously with *The Paradoxes of Mr. Pond* (London, 1937). Cassell also published larger collections, *The Father Brown Stories* (1929) and *The Father Brown Omnibus* (1933).

Cassell published in London, New York, Toronto, and Melbourne, so for these books Chesterton did not need to find a separate American publisher, until 1927, when Cassell closed its New York offices and Chesterton began to rely on Dodd, Mead and Company for his American publishing. Dodd, Mead and Company published forty-nine of his works and he helped them to become a foremost publisher of detective and mystery stories, associated with Agatha Christie's series. The firm's mystery editor, later president of the firm, Raymond T. Bond, edited a celebratory collection of Chesterton's work after his death, *The Man Who Was Chesterton* (1937). Elizabeth Scott Pryor, "Casell Publishing Company" and Gregory Ames, "Dodd, Mead and Company," *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1638-1899, Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 49 (Detroit, Michigan, 1986), 88, 126-130.

Chesterton published occasionally with others, London Dent-New York Dutton was a frequent combination, Humphreys, Duckworth, Arrowsmith. He published *Chaucer* (London, 1932) with Faber and Faber.

²³ Sheed and Ward was founded in 1926 and Chesterton probably wrote this volume of poems (one of his worst) in order to help out the new publishing company. They opened American offices in 1933, and were seen as part of the "Catholic Revival" of the period between World War I and II, publishing Ronald Knox, Christopher Dawson,

In 1940 Sheed and Ward published a collection of Chesterton's articles on "Prussianism" called *The End of the Armistice* which helped to define Chesterton for the next generation as someone who saw the world in black-and-white, divided into good and bad nations, "Catholic" or "Prussian." At the time reviewers objected to Frank J. Sheed compiling the articles into a book without preserving their original dates or context.²⁴ It seemed to give an altogether un-Chestertonian intensity to the argument. *The End of the Armistice* however lent itself to the development of the Thirties generation idea that Chesterton's Catholicism was ideological.²⁵

Maisie Ward also contributed to this interpretation when she became Chesterton's primary biographer with her two volumes published in 1944 and 1952 and portrayed Chesterton's conversion to Roman Catholicism as the transforming and defining moment of his life. She also gave new life to Shaw's idea of the "Chesterbelloc," accepting the

and Jacques Maritain, as well as non-Catholic writers associated with the movement such as C. S. Lewis. Annie E. Stevens, "Sheed and Ward," *American Literary Publishing Houses, 1638-1899, Dictionary of Literary Biography*, vol. 46 (Detroit, Michigan, 1986), 337-339. Sheed and Ward also published Hilaire Belloc's *The Place of G. K. Chesterton in English Letters* (London, 1940) and Hugh Kenner's *Paradox in Chesterton* (London, 1948) and Gary Wills's *Chesterton: Man and Mask* (New York, 1961), two works of criticism which helped to define Chesterton's reputation in the post-war period.

²⁴ "Chesterton and the Prussian," *Times Literary Supplement*, February 24, 1940; "Chesterton on Germany," *Irish Press*, Belfast, March 12, 1940.

²⁵ See Orwell, Auden, and C. S. Lewis in D. J. Conlon ed., *G. K. Chesterton: A Half Century of Views* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 102-103, 263-278, 69-72. "He seems to have believed," Auden wrote, "that in political life, there is a direct relation between Faith and Morals: a Catholic State, holding the true faith, will behave better politically than a Protestant State. France, Austria, Poland were to be trusted: Prussia was not. It so happened that, in his early manhood, the greatest threat to world peace lay, as he believed, in Prussian militarism. After its defeat in 1918, he continued to cling to his old belief so that, when Hitler came to power in 1933, he misread this Prussian phenomenon."

idea of Belloc's influence on Chesterton and the suggestion that there was something foreign about their thought.²⁶ The narrative she conveyed was of a great transformation: under the influence of Belloc Chesterton abandoned his English love of practical illogicality for a "Gallic ferocity" in party politics and smelling out corruption.²⁷ One can hear the reviewers under the influence of Ward's biography echoing back her conversion narrative. "The youth who loved tea, Queen Elizabeth, and his Teuton forebears, and shrank from wine, religious doctrine and holiday crowds ended as a fanatical champion of wine, dogma, the Common Man, the Middle Ages, and Latin civilization."²⁸

But most reviewers at the time objected to the way that she allowed the conversion to dominate her narrative of his life. "To Miss Ward he is pre-eminently the Catholic Convert and Apologist. Others will see him as a poet and politician. . . The genial giant who seemed to be Falstaff and Aquinas, Blake and Dr. Johnson, Cobbet and Chaucer and Conan Doyle all rolled into one."²⁹ They objected to the way the biography was "written from the Roman Catholic angle," and felt Ward had done Chesterton a disservice with his readership by identifying him exclusively by his Roman Catholicism.³⁰ "Chesterton was not only the Chesterton of the English Catholics. He was a national institution. All who believed in an England, pure in its public life, lively in its

²⁶ *Weekly Review*, April 13, 1944 and a number of other papers objected to Ward's "Frenchifying Belloc."

²⁷ Desmond MacCarthy, *Sunday Times*, April 23, 1944.

²⁸ *Punch*, April 12, 1944.

²⁹ *Observer*, April 16, 1944.

³⁰ *Daily Telegraph*, April 28, 1944.

social, and magical in its tradition looked to Chesterton as their leader.”³¹ One can hear one reviewer resisting in his own mind reinterpreting Chesterton according to Ward: “His conversion naturally plays a large part in this book. There perhaps he left King Alfred and the Vale of the White Horse and followed Mr. Belloc to Roncesvalles and Latin Christianity. But he was always himself.”³² Chesterton was remembered as a “trumpet-toned patriot.”³³ Shaw’s “Chesterbelloc” idea could not over power his reputation for Englishness:

In spite of a leaning toward French fashions, due possibly to a Gallic strain in his ancestry, which led him to some odd interpretations of our island life and politics, Gilbert Chesterton remained essentially in the tradition of Dickens and Cobbet and Johnson, the raciest English tradition, which would not be itself if it did not include a great deal of grumbling about the way the country was conducted. The novelist who added Humphrey Pump to the great innkeepers of literature knew the English village without and within; the poet who wrote the song “The Rolling English Road” had entered into the soul of the English countryside; and the fantasist who glorified the London suburbs in *The Napoleon of Notting Hill* added a fresh note of delight to the praise of his land.³⁴

Nevertheless Maisie Ward’s biography did fuel the idea that somehow Chesterton’s critique of England’s political order and history—which read England’s Protestant Reformation and accompanying economic transformation in the Bellocian manner as definitive of England’s character since—placed him outside the pale of English patriotism.

³¹ *Fortnightly Review*, June 1944. Also B. Ifor Evans, “The Greatest Man of His Age,” *John O’London’s Weekly*, April 21, 1944, and “G. K. Chesterton: Crusader for the Common Man: England Without Empire,” *Times Literary Supplement*, April 15, 1944.

³² Ernest Barker, *Manchester Guardian*, April 21, 1944.

³³ “Book of the Week,” *Times*, April 26, 1944.

³⁴ *Times*, November 5, 1936.

III.

G. K. Chesterton has had a strange shadow life within the Auden Generation narrative of the dominance of the left England's literary and cultural life in the inter-war years.³⁵ The Thirties Myth encouraged the idea that attempts to sustain the Whig narrative of English history, and more specifically, the Whig interpretation of English literary history ended after World War I.³⁶ Chesterton's contribution to England's cultural history is more significant in light of revisions of the Myth of the Thirties that see the post-war reaction against the public rhetoric of British national pride leading, not to political disaffection and loss of patriotism, but to a revision of Englishness and English

³⁵ Chesterton is barely mentioned in Samuel Hynes trilogy covering English cultural history in the first three decades of the twentieth century. But he has also not quite fit into Russell Kirk's pantheon of Anglo-American conservatives in his *Conservative Mind*, although Kirk does quote approvingly from his *Ballad of the White Horse* in the concluding section. *The Conservative Mind: From Burke to Eliot* (Chicago, 1967, first published 1953). See 468-469. "Chesterton and Belloc, though outside the true line of descent in conservative ideas, though sentimentally democratic and economically fanciful, did more to nourish the old conservative impulse during those dark times than did the men who should have carried on the tradition of Burke . . . But Belloc and Chesterton were only auxiliaries of conservatism." It is possible to incorporate him into the narrative of the rise of a socialist critique of capitalism by emphasizing his involvement with the 1930s Distributist and Catholic Land movements, but he is never a central figure in these narrative and they fail to capture the full extent of Chesterton's popularity in the pre-war period. Jay P. Corrin, *G. K. Chesterton and Hilaire Belloc: the battle against modernity* (Athens OH: Ohio University Press, 1981).

³⁶ J. W. Burrow, *A Liberal Descent* (1981), Stefan Collini, *Public Moralists* (1991).

Whig history in the inter-war period.³⁷ It has been recently argued that the inter-war years can be read as in terms of the persistence of a moral imagination characterized by a liberal critique of rationalism and rationalizing systems, an emphasis on domesticity, private life and personal relations, an attentiveness to the demands of family and home not just to social structures, a commitment to the idea of nationhood, a belief in necessary social and moral authority, a willingness to engage the religious, and a constant search for the inner sources of moral strength.³⁸ Highlighting Chesterton's prolific social commentary during the early decades of the twentieth century furthers this idea of a continuity in English cultural history across the period of the World Wars: a Dickensian, Chestertonian, Orwellian conception of liberal Englishness retained its popular appeal throughout.

Chesterton's particular contribution to the maintenance of this version of liberal Englishness was his revision of English religious history. He developed what began as suggestions and hints in his literary criticism about the roots of English liberalism in a long European tradition of thought into an expanded version of the Tractarian, Anglo-Catholic idea of England's continuous Catholic tradition. He then had to negotiate with radical revisionist histories in which the economic disruption of the Henrician Reformation threatened to over-power the narrative of continuity he had established in

³⁷ Victor Feske, *From Belloc to Churchill* (1996), Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, literature, and conservatism between the wars* (Routledge, London and New York, 1991).

³⁸ Allison Light questions the "Myth of the Thirties," arguing that it is based on a too exclusive attention to the "high brow" literature of the period. She also argues that lack of attention to women writers like Agatha Christie, Daphne Du Maurier, and Dorothy Sayers has warped our view of the thirties literary generation.

his literary and religious history. In the end he sustained a Whig narrative of liberal England by giving primacy to cultural history. England might be run by capitalist millionaires as his brother Cecil and Hilaire Belloc so vehemently insisted, but “the same civilization, the chivalric European civilization which asserted free-will in the thirteenth century, produced a thing called ‘fiction’ in the eighteenth. When Thomas Aquinas asserted the spiritual liberty of man, he created all the bad novels in the circulating libraries.”³⁹ “Christendom has excelled in the narrative of romance exactly because it has insisted on the theology of free-will.”⁴⁰ Chesterton’s idea of a generalized Christian, less specifically Protestant, “orthodoxy” underpinning English liberalism was a significant contribution to the understandings and constructions of World War II as a battle between liberal Christendom and totalitarian Nazi paganism.⁴¹ By the time Winston Churchill appealed to the idea of Christendom in England’s “Finest Hour” or C. S. Lewis delivered his “Mere Christianity” BBC wartime broadcasts, locating England’s past within the unity of Christendom was relatively uncontroversial. But when Chesterton began expounding on the Catholic core of Englishness in the Edwardian period, he was considered a fresh voice expounding a paradoxical, and highly amusing, vision of the nation.

³⁹ G. K. Chesterton, “On Certain Modern Writers and the Institution of the Family,” *Heretics* (1905), 144.

⁴⁰ G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy* (1908), 203. Orwell also insisted that the novel in itself was a liberal art form and an expression of the Christian [he said “Protestant”] belief in free will and that any writer who attempted it, despite his political intentions to the contrary, was sustaining liberalism.

⁴¹ Keith Robbins, “Britain, 1940, and ‘Christian Civilization,’” in Robbins ed., *History, Religion, and Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 195-213.

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